the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

NOVEMBER 2023

2024 Annual Buyer's Guide

700+ of the Best Audio Components

Kalista DreamPlay XC SACD/CD Player

2024 BUYER'S GUIDE
DISPLAY UNTIL MARCH 31, 2024

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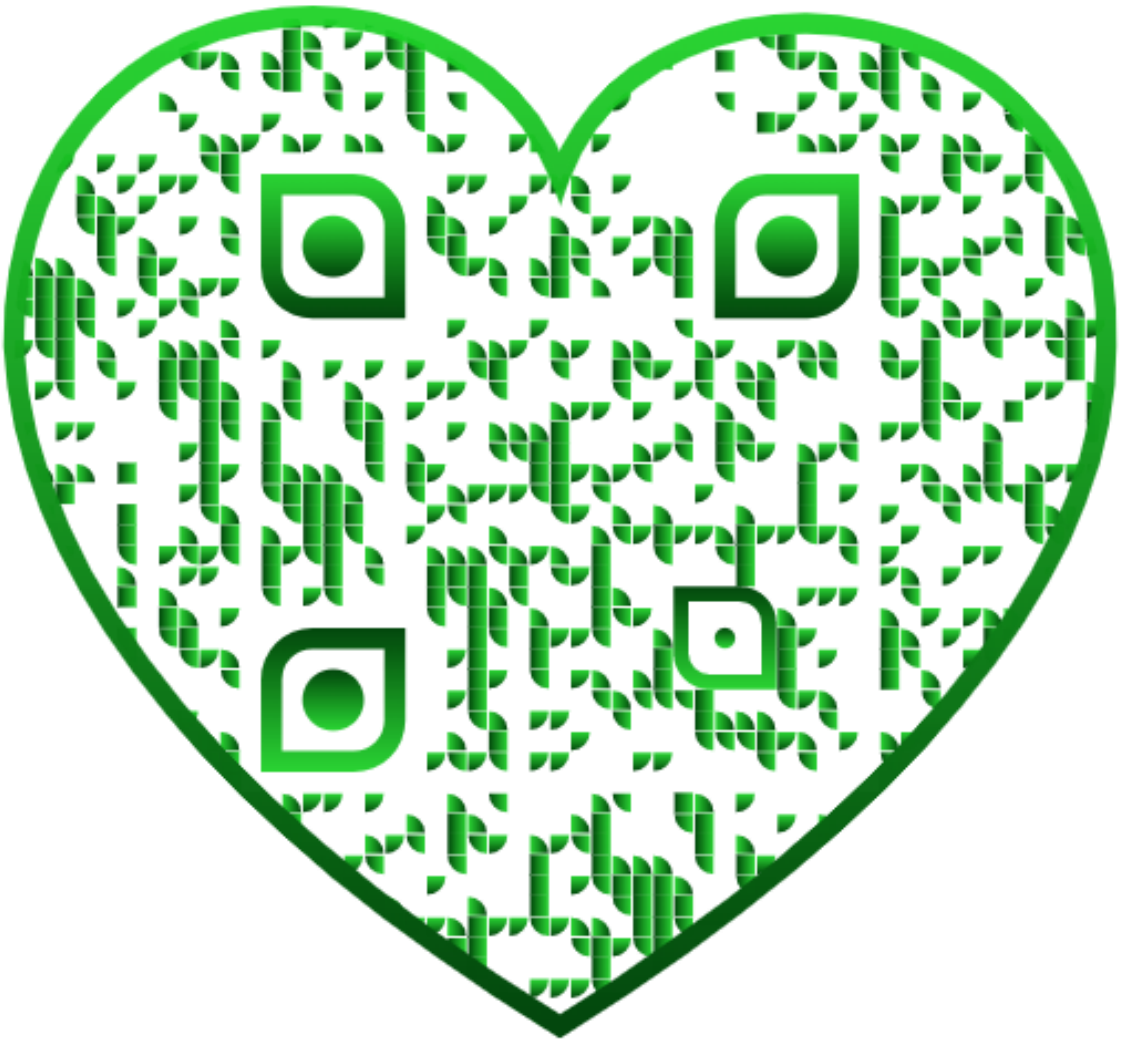

We Rocked Munich!

"I've never given an honorable mention to a cable company... This year is different. AudioQuest totally nailed it at High End Munich 2023. AQ cabling and power delivery, combined with the debut of the Rockport Orion speakers, was a magical combination…

This is what I came to the show to experience. Sound as pure as the driven snow, with spatial cues and texture, combined with an emotional performance and spectacular soundstage, captivated me."

– Chris Connaker, Audiophile Style

"With regard to the Munich show I must say, that one of the most natural but foremost realistic sounding rooms of the entire show was not from an equipment manufacturer, but from a cable manufacturer — AudioQuest! The system was sort of a blueprint, how close music reproduction can get to the original and how satisfying listening to recorded music can be."

– Ingo Schulz, FIDELITY Magazine

AQ Dragon, Niagara 7000, CH Precision C1.2, Riviera Labs APL01SE & AFM100s, Rockport Orions system was curated by AudioQuest as part of an ongoing series of Munich presentations at which AQ proves how important *cable*, *power* and *careful curation* are toward creating a truly great audio system.

audioquest®

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The Greatest Bargains in High-End Audio
(And Where to Find Them Reviewed in This Issue)

BUYER'S GUIDE

Letters

Change Our Name?

As a long-time subscriber looking backward in time, I find myself a bit irked about the "absolute sound"/"straight wire with gain" theory perpetrated on us. Back in the 70s, the mantra was "straight wire with gain" as the path to true realism in playback—the theory being "less is more" in the way of signal through electronics. But nowadays that theory has been replaced by "subjectivism." Today, component systems are espoused by TAS as a path to making music sound "as you like it." Gone is the theory of trying to bring the "real" musical event into your listening rooms. Instead, we should enjoy whatever sounds good to us.

"Straight wire with gain" was a fallacy—or maybe a deliberate marketing strategy to sell product. The fact was and is that, as you now admit, everything in the audio path from recording to LP or CD is artificial and subjective. This is the way it should be, because at least now you admit to abandoning the hope of realizing the sound of a live event in your living rooms. These days, it is all about "what you like" in terms of component system synergy.

And that is correct. Because everything in the audio chain *is* subjective and always was. I just don't understand why back then "they" insisted otherwise.

I believe being an audiophile is about the enjoyment of music through a higher-resolution system apart from expectations of *realism*, no matter how "good" or "expensive" the system is. Listening to music through a high-class system enhances *the enjoyment of music*, as an art form in itself, separate from the goal of reproducing the "live" event in your room, which never really happens.

I think you should change the name of your magazine from *The Absolute Sound* to *Good Sound*, as there was and is no reason to think the "absolute" is attainable.

Robert Bernstein

JV replies: Putting aside the fact that the "absolute sound" standard was from Issue One acknowledged to be an unrealizable ideal, something that could be more or less approximated but never fully achieved, your argument that "as you like it" listeners are the only valid type, as the "audio chain is subjective and always was," strikes me as true in part but also incomplete. Since I'm the guy who thought up the term "as you like it" to describe audiophiles whose listening priorities are beauty, power, and sensuous enjoyment, I concede that there are an awful lot of folks who would agree with you about putting pleasure first. At the same time, there is a sizable minority who wouldn't put sensuous delight all by itself. The way I see it, there is a subgroup of listeners who consider fidelity to sources to be the primary goal, which is to say they're objectivists searching for a playback system that sounds as good (or as flawed) as a recording allows it to sound. Then, of course, there is that third group—the rock upon which this magazine was founded—which hungers for the illusion of the real thing, the absolute sound contingent, idealists for whom the illusion of live music, hearing (almost seeing) recorded musicians as if they were in the room with you or you in the hall or club with them, is the ultimate prize, even if that illusion is necessarily intermittent or incomplete. As I've said repeatedly, I think there is a bit of each of these listening biases in all of us. I also think that most listeners are of your ilk. Subjective pleasure comes first, and if a recording is also realistic sounding and true to the artists' and producers' intentions, well…those are just added bonuses. But to claim that pure sensuous pleasure is the one and only valid audiophile criterion is an oversimplification.

the absolute sound

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Perfection is Attainable

MAGICO

From the Editor

Inside The Sausage Factory

For this year's annual Buyer's Guide issue, we've added some new features that we hope will make the guide even more useful to readers. The first is a "NEW" icon that calls your attention to products making their first appearance in our special annual issue of top recommendations. These are products we've reviewed in the past year that have earned our praise, as well as components that are under review with publication pending that have proved themselves worthy. The NEW icon is a red circle in the header before the product name.

The second new feature debuting in this issue is a series of short Expert Advice features that offer basic guidance to the major product categories. I hope that these bullet-point lists of essential considerations will help you in choosing just the right component for your system.

As we worked on the massive Word document of this year's Buyer's Guide (about 90,000 words), it struck me just what an amazing resource it is for readers. Here, in one place, is a compendium of every product currently available for purchase that we have evaluated and considered for inclusion in this selective feature. You can read the capsule review and then, for a more detailed description, look up the full review in your printed back issue (you do save back issues, don't you?) or on our website.

This issue represents the collective experience and insight of our unparalleled reviewing team. Nine of our reviewers have been writing about high-end audio for 30 years or more. That remarkable experience is distilled into this single issue. For every product entry, we had to have enough knowledge of the product to accept it into the review cycle and arrange to have it shipped to the reviewer. There, the writer set up the product in his system, listened to it for at least a month (usually much longer), assessed its build-quality, judged its user interface and livability, formed his opinions into words, and wrote the review. Multiply that process by the number of components in this issue and you have a staggering body of work.

The process for creating our Buyer's Guide begins by adding to last year's listing all the components we've reviewed in the past year and then painstakingly considering each entry to determine if the product is still worthy of inclusion. The introduction of newer items may make a previously recommended one less competitive, or we may simply reevaluate the component in light of a year's worth of industry advancements. Executive Editor Jonathan Valin, Associate Editor Neil Gader, and I go through the document in a series of marathon conference calls to debate the merits of each entry.

> "This issue represents the collective experience and insight of our unparalleled reviewing team."

NEW for 2024

Then, Associate Editor Neil Gader fact-checks every product on the list by sending an email to the manufacturer or distributor asking about model changes, price updates, continued availability, or if the product is soon to be discontinued. That step is followed by another round of conference calls to reconsider our choices in light of changes made during fact-checking.

Then, I ask the writer who wrote the review of newly added products to create the capsule description of the product. I compile these capsules and send them to Jonathan, whom we call "the keeper of the list." Jon is the wordsmith of our group, organizing the list, editing the text, adding the capsules in the appropriate places, and generally getting the 90,000-word document ready for layout.

I read through the document one last time before sending it to October Custom Publishing, the creative team of Torquil Dewar and Shelley Lai, who convert the text file to the beautiful layout you see, complete with photos of nearly every product.

Jonathan and I proofread the layout, with Jonathan making last minute text edits in the layout and tweaking the text as necessary, so that everything fits nicely. Neil checks all the photos. The massive feature is then combined with the rest of the issue's contents, and it undergoes a round of proofreading by our freelancer, Diana Nagler.

The overarching mission of these efforts is to provide you with a resource that helps you choose the components that bring you your favorite music, beautifully reproduced, night after night. We hope that this issue does just that.

Robert Harley

Master Collection LINEa & POWERa

KARAN
ACOUSTICS

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Whether in the world's most celebrated recording studios or in heart surgery labs...

Shunyata Research EVEREST
GAT 3 Studio, Charlotte, NC

WHEN SIGNAL RESOLUTION IS MISSION CRITICAL...

After installing Shunyata Research products, we measured a -10dB drop in residual noise floor across *all* frequencies. Every change we make to a recording is now easier to hear. There is less noise, providing a clearer picture of what the artist intended.

~ Glenn Tabor, Grammy-winning recording engineer: GAT 3 Studio, Charlotte, NC

The difference Shunyata Research products make is night and day. It felt like my recording studio had been supercharged. Improvements in clarity were immediately noticeable.

~ Greg Wells, Grammy-winning recording engineer

We've been enjoying the increased resolution that comes with using Shunyata Research products in my studio for some years now, starting with the 5.1 mix of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* in 2003.

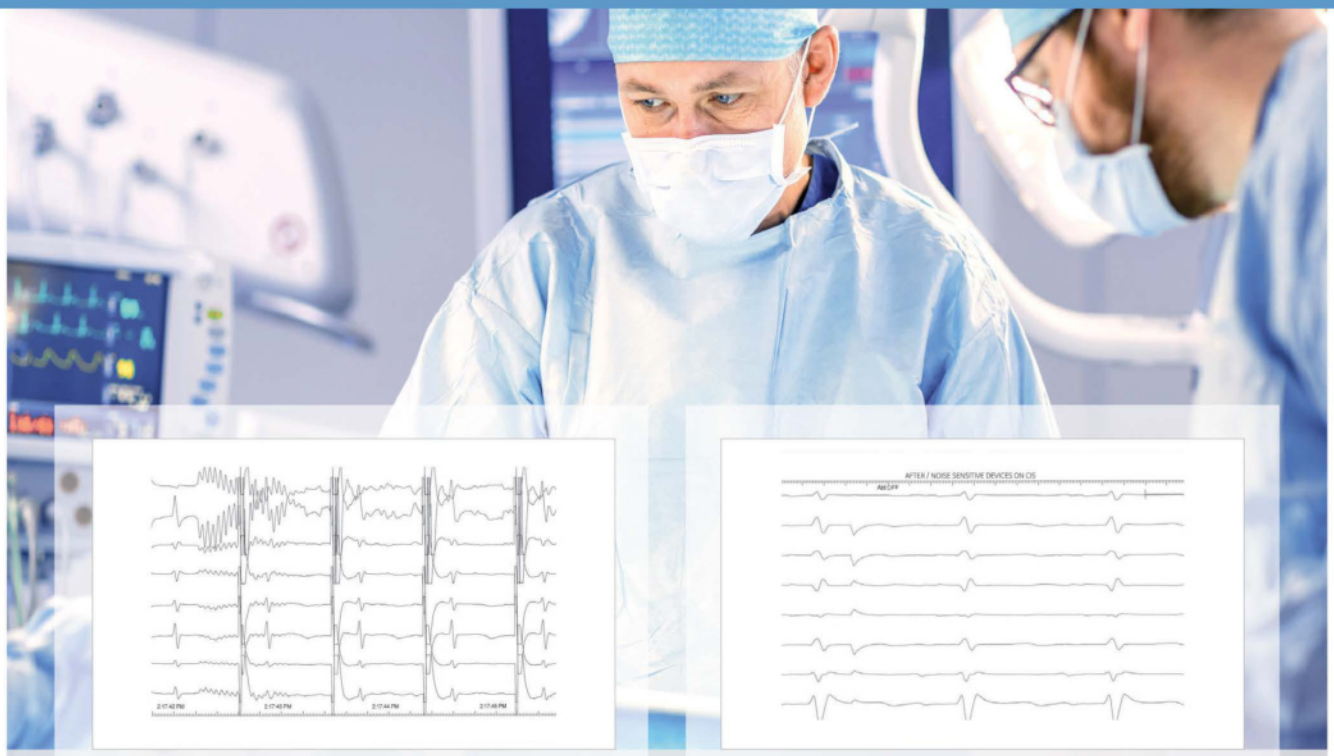
~ James Guthrie, Grammy-winning recording engineer

Shunyata Research products have made a remarkable difference in my reference system. A bigger difference than changing the whole front end.

~ Rick Rubin, eight-time Grammy-winning record producer

See your local Shunyata Research retailer today, schedule an evaluation!

Shunyata Research products achieve profound, measurable results!



COMPARISON BEFORE: Screen 1
Depicts heart activity with unaddressed electrical noise on the line with electronics connected to an isolation transformer.

COMPARISON AFTER: Screen 2
Depicts the same conditions, but with monitoring equipment and recording amplifiers plugged into Clear Image Scientific® power distribution and shielded power cords.

SHUNYATA RESEARCH DELIVERS.

In 2015 **Shunyata Research founded a sister-company named Clear Image Scientific® (CIS®)**, dedicated to the design of power-products used to enhance signal resolution for scientific and medical applications.

The noise level on the mapping computer after applying the CIS® system was the lowest I have seen in 10 years and over thousands of cases.

~ Dr. Daniel Melby,
Electrophysiology Lab Director:
Minneapolis Heart Institute, Minneapolis, MN

After installing the CIS® system, we have the cleanest 64 unipolar signals that I have seen in any of the labs that are doing Topera Rotor based Mapping.

~ Dr. Bradley Bacik, DO FACC, FHRS,
Director of Electrophysiology:
Jefferson Health, Philadelphia, PA

All of our EP staff and surgeons noticed an improvement in the signal quality in each of our three surgical labs after the application of CIS® systems.

~ Garry Chamberlain,
REMS, Assistant Director, Biomedical Engineering:
Deborah Heart and Lung Center, Browns Mills, NJ

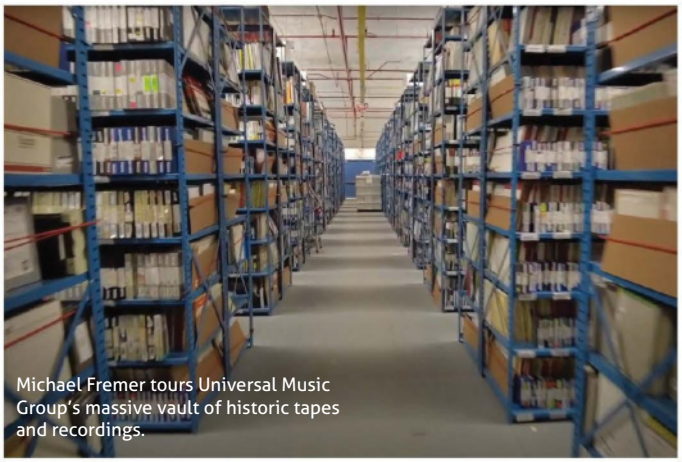
After installing the CIS® units, the bipolar noise levels on the mapping catheters went from fairly high at .13 —.15 to less than 0.01 mV, which is below the threshold of what the system can measure!

~ Dr. Kent Morris, Electrophysiology Lab Director:
Norton Health Hospital, Louisville, KY

Video Preview

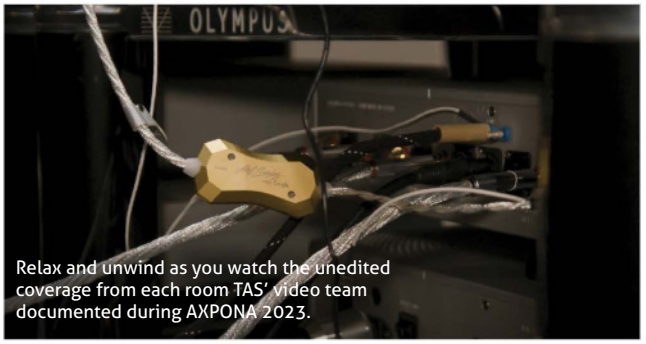
Audiophile YouTuber Thomas Tan from Thomas & Stereo joins TAS with his first review of the KEF R3 Meta.

Tom Martin shows off his setup during his Magico A5 loudspeaker review.



Michael Fremer tours Universal Music Group's massive vault of historic tapes and recordings.

Robert Harley previews the T+A Solitaire S 540 loudspeaker w/ T+A's Jim Shannon.



Relax and unwind as you watch the unedited coverage from each room TAS' video team documented during AXPONA 2023.

The Absolute Sound's YouTube Channel

Robert Harley

If you're looking for more great high-end audio content, check out *The Absolute Sound*'s new YouTube video channel. It is chock-full of videos (more than 150 and counting) that cover everything from a nostalgic look at classic audio products to reviews of the latest components. We've got behind-the-scenes factory tours, show reports, audio-basics tutorials, and designer interviews.

We've also got product reviews, primarily of lower- to mid-priced components that are stunning overachievers. Our newest videos include Tom Martin showing the setup of his Magico A5 loudspeaker; Michael Fremer taking you inside the Universal Music Group's massive vault of historic tapes and archival recordings; my own preview the T+A Solitaire S 540 loudspeaker with T+A's Jim Shannon; and our newest video contributor Thomas Tan from Thomas & Stereo's review of the KEF R3 Meta speaker. We've also got unedited coverage of each room at the recent AXPONA show. That's just a sampling of lots of fresh new videos on TAS' YouTube channel.

Video is an exciting way of delivering more and more varied content than we can provide in the magazine. We also hope to reach the next generation of music lovers who care about sound quality. Go to youtube.com/@TheTASmagazine. While you're there, be sure to hit the "Subscribe" button so that you're notified of new videos. You can also sign up for our weekly newsletter. I hope you'll check it out. tas

dCS
ONLY THE MUSIC

LINA

dCS is thrilled and honored that the Expert Imaging and Sound Association—EISA—selected the Lina series as the best high-end headphone solution.

The dCS Lina series was conceived as a highly capable and hugely versatile selection of audio separates that can be used independently or as part of a complete playback system—and excel within a wide range of environments and a variety of applications.

Lina's exceptional musicality and transparency make it ideal for use in a two-channel audio system where space is limited. It is equally at home in a state-of the-art headphone system. A Lina system can be built component by component. The system can begin with the Lina Streaming DAC. Later, the Lina Master Clock or the Lina Headphone Amplifier can be added.

Lina shares the same technology, obsessive attention to detail, and build quality as the multi-award-winning dCS Vivaldi, Rossini, and Bartók.

Available now for audition at authorized dCS dealers.

EISA AWARD
Best Product
2023-2024
HIGH-END HEADPHONE SOLUTION
dCS Lina System

dCSonlythemusic

Pictured: Lina DAC (top), optional Master Clock (bottom)

EXPERT ADVICE LOUDSPEAKERS

Choosing a Loudspeaker

Match the speaker to the amplifier driving it.

- Pay attention to the speaker's sensitivity and impedance when matching the speaker to an amplifier. A low-sensitivity speaker (say, 85dB) driven by a low-powered amplifier (say, 30Wpc) will be restricted in how loudly it will play and in its dynamic range.
- The higher the speaker's sensitivity, the less amplifier power you need. Every 3dB increase in speaker sensitivity (say, 88dB to 91dB) is exactly the same as doubling the amplifier power in terms of how loudly the speaker will play.
- Speakers with a very low impedance need an amplifier capable of high current output, indicated by the amplifier's ability to increase its power output into low impedances.

Choose a speaker appropriate for your room's size, appearance, and how it will fit into your home.

- A speaker that's too large for a given room will result in excessive and boomy bass. A speaker that's too small for the room won't play loudly and fill the room with sound.
- Some speakers are wrapped in inexpensive vinyl, while others sport lavish woodwork or beautifully painted finishes. Choose a model that you will be happy sharing your living room with for years to come.

Select a speaker that fits your musical tastes and listening habits.

- Fans of rock and full-scale orchestral works should lean toward larger models with deep bass extension, wide dynamic range, and ability to play loudly without strain.
- If your tastes lean more toward vocals, singer/songwriters, small-scale classical music, your priorities should be midrange clarity and smooth tonal balance rather than bass extension and dynamics.

Use reviews to create a short list of candidates, and then audition those models yourself at a dealer.

- Read lots of reviews to narrow down your list of candidates, and then visit your local specialty audio dealer to audition the speakers you are considering.
- Don't be in a hurry to buy the first speaker that sounds good to you; listen to several before deciding.
- Take your time during the audition and listen to a wide variety of music of your choosing. The place to discover a speaker's flaws is the dealer's showroom, not your home.

DESKTOP LOUDSPEAKERS

Magnepan Mini Maggie System

$2095

The Mini-Maggie system is a three-piece, ribbon-tweeter-equipped, planar-magnetic, dipole speaker system intended primarily for desktop use. Featuring small tweeter/midrange panels that sit atop the desk and a stereo mid/bass panel that sits in the footwell below, it is arguably the finest desktop speaker ever made. In fact, in detail, resolution, purity, freedom from grain, soundstage width and depth, and, above all, coherence, the Mini-Maggie rig sounds for all the world like a pair of Magnepan's exceptional 3.7i's on a smaller scale. (223)

Audience The One 1+1 V5

$3495

The One is a single full-range driver shoehorned into a small box. The driver itself is the same unit, the A3A, that Audience uses in its $2960 1+1 V3. According to Audience, the A3A has exceptionally flat response, claimed to be within ±3dB from 40Hz to 22kHz. The upscale version, the 1+1 V5, employs a significantly redesigned version of this full-range driver (one each front and back, plus passive radiators on either side), top-level Au24SX internal wiring, re-tuned passive radiators, and custom tellurium solderless binding posts. The result is more resolution and detail (particularly in the treble), superior transparency, wider dynamic expression, and greater midrange purity. Properly set up, the One and the 1+1 V3 are the best desktop speakers reviewer Steven Stone has heard. Robert Harley also uses the 1+1 V3 in his desktop system. (V2 versions reviewed in 236, 273)

Sony SA-Z1

$7999

Sony's latest Z Series offering, the SA-Z1 is a nearfield loudspeaker system with built-in amplification, input selection, and a bevy of special sonic adjustment options. It is a complete system that only needs users to supply an input source or two. The SA-Z1 system does not support headphones or subwoofers; it is its own self-contained thing—a complete musical universe unto itself. And what a universe it is, setting a new standard for what small desktop speaker system can do in soundstaging, harmonic purity, dynamic acuity, and low-frequency speed and definition. (312)

Wilson Audio TuneTot

$10,890 (Wilson Audio TuneTot ISO-Base,$2900/TuneTot stand,$3100)

The diminutive but hefty (29-pound) two-way TuneTot is intended for those who love the Wilson sound but must place their loudspeakers close to a room boundary. A 1" doped silk-fabric tweeter gets its own sealed sub-enclosure, and the paper-pulp woofer is vented to the rear, with foam plugs provided in the event bass proves unruly. A system of front and rear spikes permits the speakers to be placed at a wide range of heights above the

WADAX

Different By Design

ATLANTIS REFERENCE [DAC]

"The Wadax Reference DAC is not only the best-sounding DAC I've heard, it's the best sounding by a considerable margin."
Robert Harley, Editor-in-chief, The Absolute Sound, Issue 312, January 2021

The beating heart of every WADAX DAC is our unique, proprietary musIC Chip digital decoding process. A sophisticated, load-sensitive, feed-forward error correction algorithm eliminates the parasitic time, phase and amplitude errors that disrupt and distort digital recordings.

The result is a massive advance in natural musical performance – an advance recognised by audiophiles and reviewers around the world.

A result that redefines what's possible from digital recordings.

And that's just one example of the ground-breaking technologies developed by WADAX. It's really not surprising that nothing else sounds like the Reference DAC – because nothing else works the same way.

WADAX

Discover the beating heart of digital music

floor or shelf or desktop, all the while preserving the correct time alignment of the two drivers. With a variety of tube and solid-state amplifiers, the Tots manifested considerable poise with complex and dynamically challenging music; the bass foundation was quite satisfactory with large-scale symphonies as well as exuberant rock 'n' roll. (286)

TABLETOP SYSTEMS

Naim Mu-so 2

$1599

It may be a similar size and shape to a "boom-box," but once you hear what this compact system (with three smallish cone drivers per side, 75W on tap for each driver, and integrated preamp, DAC, streaming, and DSP can do, there will be no mistake. It is a different creature entirely. Its best qualities compare favorably to those of systems of separate components up to about twice its price, though it will not play super-loud and won't give you the kind of wide, deep soundstage that you get from individual speakers. Highly recommended. (306)

Sonus faber Omnia

$1999

Sonus faber's eye-catching wireless streaming audio system takes a bold approach by maximizing its use of DSP and woofer-tuning to offer a high-end-component-like experience. Capable of a satisfying midrange-forward energy, the Omnias had expressive vocal imaging with both male and female singers. Bass impact was surprisingly robust and dynamic. Most effective was its ability to throw a room-filling and immersive soundstage well past the boundaries of its cabinet. Omnia balances high style, sound, and size in a package that first-time and long-time admirers of this iconic Italian brand can enjoy. (334)

T+A Caruso

$4450

This tabletop system measures just under a foot in each dimension yet is packed with seven drivers (including a down-firing 6.7" woofer) and three switching power amps. The Roon-ready Caruso supports just about any source (FM, Internet Radio, optical disc, USB stick, and streaming platform). Though the stereo spread can't compete with an audio system where the two channels are more than a foot apart, the robustly constructed Caruso offers satisfying bass slam and dynamic coherence, even if asked to play loud at a party. (322)

ACTIVE STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS

Vanatoo Transparent One Encore

$649

The Vanatoo Transparent One Encore all-in-ones (with 5.25" aluminum cone woofers and 1" aluminum dome tweeters powered by internal Class D amps generating 100Wpc for the woofs and 20Wpc for the tweets) look boxy and simple and just fine on a desktop. Equipped with assorted analog and digital inputs and a built-in Bluetooth receiver, they can handle just about any source. For streaming, they don't need anything more than Chromecast to produce solid sound—and even that's unnecessary if you use Bluetooth. Deep enough bass, nice midrange clarity, even a little sparkle on the uppers give them better than decent sound: You can't ask for too much more for the convenience and the money. (301)

KEF LSX II Meta

$1399

The LSX IIs are cloth-wrapped, compact, wireless speakers that pack a shocking punch. They come with several different connection options including Bluetooth, optical, USB-C, AUX, and HDMI ARC, along with the classic streaming options (Wi-Fi, AirPlay 2, Chromecast). The phone app can control most settings, and the LSX IIs can decode DSD and MQA natively. There's an Ethernet port for hardwiring the internet connection, and a physical tether can connect the two speakers for maximum sound quality. However, even disconnected, the LSX IIs sound fantastic, with an energetic and exciting midrange and a surprisingly solid low end. The UniQ driver produces a neutral but extremely engaging sound. (Meta version, forthcoming; LSX reviewed in 293)

Elac Navis ARB51

$1999

Elac's active three-way compact is beautifully finished. With a rich full-bodied midrange, it projects a warm, cozy sound that proves ideal for vocals. (Fans of choral music will revel in the clarity of massed voices.) The Elac has a weighty, dynamic, bottom-up balance that suggests a speaker that not only doesn't need coddling but actually dares you to crank it up—way up. A hallmark of active bass is the way it grabs onto rhythm tracks, orchestral percussion (like kettle drums), or organ pedal points. One of the rare small compacts where you don't have to scale back expectations in order to enjoy it. (291)

An American in Germany?

T66 and the author are from the US — but the speaker's performance and the comments about GoldenEar at the Munich High-End show are for all mankind:

"The big AudioQuest room with Rockport speakers was typically fantastic — AQ has a habit of putting their all into the entire system in their exhibit rooms so that you can hear everything that the cables are doing (or, more importantly, not doing).

But it was the smaller AudioQuest and GoldenEar room that really captured my attention thanks to a new and very slim pair of GoldenEar T66s."

– Marc Phillips, Part-Time Audiophile

Get to know the T66. We believe it will also capture your attention.

An all-new GoldenEar floorstander with powered bass.

Available now.

GoldenEar™

KEF LS50 Wireless II

$2799

The KEF LS50 Wireless marks a reinvention of the company's iconic LS50 compact speaker as a wireless and active system. It still sports KEF's patented Uni-Q concentric drivers, but in this wireless model the Uni-Q is driven by a built-in dual-mono 230Wpc amplifier, a streaming preamplifier, and a Roon-ready 24/192 DAC. The LS50 Wireless II has a high degree of detail and overall naturalness of timbre—particularly through the midrange. Also, these smallish speakers pump out punchy bass that delves deeper than expected. (Alternatively, the LS50 Meta is a passive version of the same speaker, so named for its innovative internal damping properties.) Quick-stepping, snappy, and musical across genres, the LS50 Wireless II packs big sound in a little box. (LS50 Wireless, 285; Meta, 317)

Cabasse Pearl Akoya

$3990 ($798/pr. stands)

A marvel of packaging and sophistication, Cabasse's three-way, tri-axial sphere comes with built-in Class D amplifiers, a DAC with DSP control and room-correction calibration, and Wi-Fi. Just add a high-resolution streaming service or a thumb drive, and it becomes a fully self-contained high-performance audio system—all in an enclosure the size of a honeydew. Sonically, the Akoya has an engaging, midrange-forward personality. Imaging is stable and well-focused. Overall response is fairly linear, with dollops of air and buoyancy. Ultimately, there's some roll-off in the treble, but nothing that sets off alarm bells. Bass extension dips into the 50–60Hz range with surprising impact and amplitude. (322)

Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo

$4998 (stands are an additional $999)

The Formation Duo is the first in what will likely be a long line of active wireless loudspeakers from the venerable British speaker-maker. Inside each cabinet the Duo incorporates wireless-streaming capability, DACs, and amplification, all under DSP control. You simply plug in the Duo, and with a few taps on the Formation app, you're streaming music. The Duo's sound quality is a knockout, with spectacular imaging, a very smooth and flat tonal balance, and surprisingly extended bass. Easy to use, highly musical, and technologically advanced, the Duo brings true high-end performance to a lifestyle product. (298)

STAND-MOUNTED LOUDSPEAKERS

PSB Alpha P5

$399

The PSB Alpha P5 is a budget mini-monitor for our time. Sonically it's pure PSB, with a nicely weighted midrange. non-fatiguing treble, and overall naturalism that make it very engaging. Commendably, there are few of the tonal peaks and bumps associated with lesser-engineered speakers in this class. Midrange presence and dynamic energy are captured with many of the strengths of the P5's sibling T20 floorstander. Vocals have a nice blend of physicality, warmth, and clean articulation, with hints of airiness in the upper octaves. The ability to fully define the contours of an auditorium is a wee bit beyond the P5's purview; nonetheless, it conveys its share of string section layering and orchestral depth, with an image stability that outclasses much of the competition. (306)

Polk R200

$699

By taking top-notch Legend-Series transducers and putting them in a minimalist cabinet, Polk's Reserve Series hits sonic pay dirt at a blue-plate price. This two-way compact cuts right to the heart of the music, boasting equal measures of accuracy, dynamism, and immediacy. As well designed as it is lively, it doesn't shrink into the background tonally or dynamically. Nor does it recess images via frequency dips and droops in order to manufacture a false sense of soundstage depth. In the low end, the R200 just takes care of business. Sure, some of the visual glitter and gloss has been minimized. But the utilitarian enclosure is well executed. A sleeper in the best sense—not showy, not expensive, but a musical, no-nonsense, high-end *player*. (319)

Piega Ace 30

$995

The Piega Ace 30s are "compact loudspeakers," and that's an understatement. At approximately 8.6" tall, 5.5" wide, and 6.2" deep, they're the smallest speakers DK has reviewed to date, and they weigh a mere 6.6 pounds each. DK was delighted by their fit and finish: they're made of aluminum with a curved cabinet and includes an AMT ribbon tweeter and a 4.7" (120mm) MDS midrange driver. Despite their diminutive nature, the midrange was luscious, and the treble truly sparkled—though if you love bass, you'll need a subwoofer. Even still, the lower end was tight, if not truly deep. The sound was more natural and bigger than you'd expect, though there are limitations inherent in their size. They're worth checking out if space is at a premium and if that price tag isn't a limiting factor. (326)

Sonus faber Lumina I

$999

The Sonus faber Lumina I sounds shockingly big despite its very small size. The form factor is attractive and stylish

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in keeping with the Sonus faber brand, and the sound is gorgeous, smooth, and realistically deep for such a small bookshelf speaker. Though it works best with a powerful amplifier, the Lumina I can really sing when given the chance. Bookshelf speakers don't typically create powerful bass, and while this was certainly true to some extent, reviewer DK was still absolutely astounded by the big, lush music coming from the Lumina. The soundstage was deep and wide, and instruments felt tight and accurate. The midrange was buttery and delightful, and the upper end had a good bit of luxurious sparkle to keep things interesting. For DK's money, this is the sub-$1k bookshelf speaker to beat. (315)

Audiovector QR1

$1725

The smallest loudspeaker in Audiovector's entry-level QR Series, the QR1 offers sonic performance that is anything but that of a typical compact. Linear through the greater midrange and nicely resolved from the upper-mids well into the harmonic range, the QR1 struck a reasonable balance between detail and midrange and midbass tonal density. While there is a hint of recession in the upper mids, QR1 is no wallflower, either. Effortlessly refined, micro-dynamically alive, and easy on the ears for long stretches without any sense of fatigue, its delicacy on cymbals, openness on brass, and air and sensitivity with violin, either solo or ensemble, are a pleasure to experience. (326)

GoldenEar BRX

$1900

The BRX sits on the top rung of the GoldenEar Bookshelf Series' ladder. This two-way features a silky ribbon tweeter, plus a responsive mid/bass driver augmented by a pair of passive planar radiators. Sonically, the BRX seems born to play the classics, chamber, and jazz. As if etched into its DNA, it possesses the timbral and harmonic complexities of real acoustic instruments and the spatial qualities of real acoustic settings. Tonally, BRX has a neutral-to-warmish signature. The midrange octaves are rich, balanced, expressive, and highly texture, producing a more romantic sound that illuminates music in a mellower light with a softer, rose-like complexion. The treble range is effortless, agile, and airily transparent, in the way ribbon tweeters tend to be. The GoldenEar BRX is a black-tie classicist of a high order. You won't need a golden ear to enjoy its class-leading blend of musicality and refinement. (315)

Watkins Generation 4rev-1

$2995

The late Bill Watkins poured decades of experience into this small and innovative two-way. One of its key design elements is operation of the woofer as a wide-range driver without a low-pass filter. The 1" aluminum/magnesium alloy dome is damped to tame ultrasonic breakup modes. An unusual patent-pending bass-reflex tuning is implemented with two damped internal chambers. The end result is in-room extension to nearly 41Hz, a remarkable accomplishment for a 6.5" driver in a compact enclosure. Expect an exceptionally wide and transparent soundstage coupled with transient speed, precise image focus, timbral accuracy, and an ability to retrieve low-level details that are generally unheard of at this price point. Recently "rev-1" added Cardas silver inputs and Cardas 11ga Litz wiring. (278)

MoFi SourcePoint 10

$3999 (stands $499)

Andrew Jones' mission was to design MoFi's first loudspeaker with the aim of delivering a design that does justice to the company's studio heritage. He opted for a two-way using a new 10-inch concentric driver housed in a 50-liter bass-reflex, stand-mount cabinet. Bass response extends to 40Hz and is well defined, partly due to a solid and well-braced cabinet. What is equally remarkable is the full-bodied upper bass and lower midrange, which lend orchestral music a sense of gravitas well beyond the reach of most stand-mounts. The midrange is smooth and low in distortion, Soundstage transparency is exceptional, highlighting convincing depth and width perspectives. Excellent driver integration is responsible for a wide sweet spot and an impressive sense of coherence and spatial solidity. The SP10 makes a major statement in the under $10k speaker category and breathes new life into the concentric loudspeaker genre. (338)

M&K S150

$4398

In classic sub/sat configuration (paired with M&K's redoubtable X-10 subwoofer), the compact acoustic-suspension S150 monitor offers a consistency of control, timing, wide-ranging dynamics, and, most particularly, a level of resolution that few monitors in this price range attain. Consistent with its studio-monitor heritage, the S150 has a high-energy midrange that veers closer to the cooler and more clinical side. The M&K's upper mids and treble performance are smooth, open, and without peaky misbehavior. It is wonderfully adept at reproducing both male and female voices. A trio of vertically arrayed soft-dome tweeters contributes to sharply focused imaging and an uncluttered soundstage. Add to this naturalistic transient speed and attack, and the S150 is a thoroughly contemporary and thrillingly musical take on a full-range stereo speaker system. (326)

Revel Performa3 M126Be

$4400

To describe the M126Be as merely the hot-rodded version of the nifty little two-way M106 does not give it its sonic due. There are fireworks and butt-kicking dynamics, yes, but more importantly, there's a degree of silken, shimmering refinement that's rare in this segment. Tricked out with a new 1" beryllium dome tweeter with a ceramic-coated, cast-aluminum acoustic-lens waveguide, and a 6.5" ceramic/aluminum-composite mid/bass, the M126Be offers low-level resolution, timbral realism, and top-end air and speed that are improved across the board. The low-end response from its bass-reflex cabinet is quick, with little indication of port artifacts—the timbral clarity of acoustic bass, for example, is richly defined in both extension and grip. Relatively easy to drive at a sensitivity of 86dB and a load of 8 ohms, the M126Be still craves good amplification. (290)

Harbeth C7ES-3 XD

$4490

Over the past three years, Alan Shaw has completed a project of upgrading the entire line of Harbeth loudspeakers to XD ("eXtended definition") status, offering greater transparency, extensive crossover work for better integration of drivers, and RADIAL 2, the latest formulation of Shaw's proprietary polymer driver-diaphragm compound. This latest version of the Compact 7 is over most of its range one of the most neutral transducers PS has heard and unquestionably one of the most musically natural, boasting a truthfulness to voices and the timbre of instruments and a coherence, transparency, and lack of coloration that rival the best in his experience. Its bass extension approaches the bottom octave, albeit at reduced level and power. For its size and design type, this loudspeaker is at once a true reference standard and a music lover's dream. (342)

Rogers LS3/5A Classic SE

$4895 (LS3 stands $1995)

In hindsight, it is readily apparent that this BBC-spec mini-monitor is, in fact, one of the most influential loudspeakers of all time, having inspired a host of imitations since its inception in the 1970s. Its cult status rests primarily on its near-point-source imaging precision. The Classic SE is an attempt to enhance dynamic expressiveness by replacing the thin front baffle with Panzerholz and upgrading drivers and crossover resistors. The result is a major increase in performance. Nothing has been lost in spatial conviction or image focus, but midrange transparency has increased, as has the sensation of compelling emotional tonality. Expect a quality midbass range as befitting a sealed-box design with extension to about 70Hz. It performs admirably on Baroque music, jazz, and vocals, but it isn't ideal for wide-range orchestral music. (331)

Alta Audio Alyssa

$5000 (piano black); $6000 (wood finishes)

Audiophiles have many choices when they look for a high-resolution loudspeaker that delivers a lot of detail. They can also find many loudspeakers with sunny musical dispositions. But in Steven Stone's experience, a loudspeaker that can deliver high resolution and inner detail yet remain musical in the process is as common as a unicorn. In SS's systems the Alta Alyssa did exactly that. He could listen all day at reference levels without fatigue, and yet never feel during that time as if he were being spared any of the micro-details. For many audiophiles, the Alta Alyssa could well be the loudspeaker that enters their listening rooms and never leaves. (320)

Rosso Fiorentino Pienza

$5400

Francesco Rubenni is a man to watch. Founder of the Florence-based speaker manufacturer Rosso Fiorentino, Rubenni clearly knows the sound of live music, which he regularly enjoys in his custom-built listening studio/recording venue, La Sala del Rosso. And while his company's wonderful Pienza is most assuredly a mini-monitor, it's no small-fry when it comes to sonic performance. Sporting a 1" silk-dome neodymium tweeter and 5.25" glass-fiber-composite mid/woofer cone, the rear-ported Pienza delivers a large and deep soundstage, plenty of output for small-to-medium rooms, and notably good low-end output for its size. With a lovely natural tonal balance that convincingly fleshes out instruments and voices and a seductively silky upper end, the Pienza brings a beautiful if slightly romantic tilt to things. Most importantly, it's a powerful communicator of the emotion behind the music. (328)

ATC SCM20P

$5499

With no-nonsense studio-monitor roots, ATC's two-way compact is an honest and sensitively balanced purveyor of music. Highly critical of poor recordings and laudatory of great ones, it has no unearned or skewed frequency dips or bumps. Recently it received ATC's newly engineered, dual-suspension softdome tweeter, which has only made a good thing better. The same commanding presence and fidelity to sources, but with more expansive transparency, speed, and resolving power that add depth, midrange conviction, and a pillow of air to the upper frequencies. And there's that distinctive quality of tunefulness in the bass that only acoustic-suspension designs seem to latch onto. The only downside: at 84dB sensitivity, just make sure it has the amplifier power it demands. ATC SCM20P continues to be NG's two-way reference—the compact that guides him along the audiophile path. (Forthcoming)

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Stirling Broadcast LS3/6

$6695

The original LS3/6 was the BBC version of the Spendor BC1. About ten years ago, Derek Hughes, son of Spencer, designed this modern-day version of the LS3/6 for Stirling Broadcast. The Stirling Broadcast LS3/6, duly licensed by the BBC, is thus, in effect, a modernized BC1. Like its ancestor, it is a speaker of great neutrality and smoothness, and it goes beyond the BC1 by a wide margin in dynamic capacity and bass control. Compared to Derek Hughes' more recent effort at modernizing the design principles of the BC1 in the Graham LS8/1, the SB LS3/6 is slightly less projected at 1.5–2kHz than the LS8/1 and, to REGs ears, thus delivers a bit more of the musical midrange truth. The LS3/6 has somewhat less bass extension than the LS8/1, however. The LS3/6 also has a considerably lower price. Despite limited USA distribution, the LS3/6 is well worth seeking out, says REG for whom it is a perennial favorite. (228)

Vivid Audio Kaya 12

$6900

Vivid Audio's Kaya 12 is the smallest loudspeaker in its four model Kaya range. At a mere 15 inches tall, this two-way, ported stand-mount demonstrates the kind of outgoing, uncolored midrange, top-end poise, and go-for-broke output that made it one of the biggest little crowd-pleasers to ever spend time in NG's listening room. The Kaya 12 proved itself to be the very definition of the incredible disappearing compact. Inter-driver coherence was excellent, essentially seamless during critical transitions and with no evident treble beaming. This level of imaging precision also contributed to making the Kaya 12 a richly engaging voice speaker. While true bottom-octave bass response was beyond its reach, there was much in the way of satisfying mid and upper-bass response. Few other compact two-way loudspeakers have managed to achieve the overall sense of midrange balance, tonal verisimilitude, and seat-of-the-pants musicality of the Kaya 12. (331)

Audiovector R1 Arreté

$7000

Audiovector builds all its own drivers in Denmark, and the company's founder, Ole Klifoth, has long been partial to the Heil Air-Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter, a design that permits very extended high-frequency reproduction with the acoustic output of a much larger dome. A portion of Audiovector's AMT output is sent backwards, enhancing the R1's spatiality. In addition to utilizing Audiovector's best AMT tweeter, all the R Series models with the Arreté designation have a grounding circuit that channels mechanical energy away from the 6.5" woofer's basket to a third binding post on the back of the speaker. The Freedom Grounding Concept circuit, as Audiovector calls it, is included in the base price of $6950; the $850 cable that connects to both speakers and terminates in a Schuko connector that plugs into a wall outlet must be considered essential, given what it does for perceived dynamics and bass articulation. The R1 mates exceptionally well with a good subwoofer, and although it's among the finest stand-mounts at its price point by itself, with the addition of a sub you have a three-way full-range loudspeaker system that in anything other than a very large room will beat the pants off any $10k floorstander you'd care to put it up against. (319)

Totem Element Fire V2

$8450

The second generation of Totem's Element Fire is an example of a loudspeaker that plays bigger than its physical size would suggest. Much bigger. Though the dimensions of the enclosure are 8.8" x 16.6" x 11.7" (approximately—the cabinet eschews parallel surfaces) the published low-frequency response specification of 30Hz is quite believable, even with blues, big band, or pipe organ. The Fire V2s will mate nicely with a subwoofer, but it's surprising how infrequently that's mandated. Dynamic life—"jump factor"—is excellent and the speakers maintain their composure with the most complex musical programs. Much of this has to do with the 7" mid/woofer in this two-way, which weighs close to 10 pounds and employs 17 neodymium magnets. Dedicated stands aren't available, but any number of popular 24" ones, preferably with the capacity to be mass-loaded, will work just fine. (330)

Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4

$8500

The 800 D4 takes every element of the vaunted D3 up a notch. All models in Bowers & Wilkins' latest flagship series, including the 805, get a cabinet with more aluminum, a rear-mounted crossover that yields greater internal volume, an elongated "turbine" enclosure for the diamond-coated tweeter, handsome leather trim, and a biomimetic (versus fabric) midrange spider mechanism. The resulting sound is pure 800: resolving, musical, and self-effacing. The drivers and cabinet are so quiet that the subtlest musical flourishes emerge. And despite being stand-mounted, the 805 goes surprisingly deep, with satisfying punch and low-end timbral complexity. A terrific value at $8000 per pair. (326)

Magico A1

$9400 black/ $9800 silver

Magico's smallest loudspeaker, in the company's entry-level A Series, is a return to a 2-way design last seen with the company's Q1 bookshelf/standmount but with updated drivers and crossover implementation—and a substantially *lower* asking price. The 28mm beryllium tweeter is the same found in larger A Series models; the 6.5" mid/bass driver, featuring a layer of XG nanographene bonded to a carbon-fiber membrane, was newly developed

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In a partnership between two iconic British brands sharing an obsession with creating the best experience, our collaboration has extended from in-car audio systems to KEF x Lotus products for the home. A state-of-the-art wireless high-fidelity speaker system, LS60 Wireless allows you to stream from any source and connect to any home audio devices with audiophile-grade power. Inspired by British Racing Green of the Lotus heritage, LS60 Wireless Lotus Edition brings the track spirit into your home in a harmony of design and innovation.

for the A1. The speaker manifests the top-to-bottom coherency characteristic of the best 2-ways with a seamless continuity to voices and instruments covered by both transducers. Spatiality is outstanding, as expected with smaller monitors. Bass is clean and substantial: Depending on one's musical interests, a subwoofer may not be required. Those who are not deploying their A1s in an actual bookshelf, on a countertop, or on some other piece of furniture, can find a number of after-market stand options, including two from Sound Anchor specifically designed for the A1. (342)

Graham Audio LS8/1

$9700

Designed by Derek Hughes, son of Spencer Hughes, the developer of the Spendor BC1 in the late 1960s, these are the latest embodiments of the principles of that classic, epoch-making mid/bass plus two-tweeter design with a two cubic foot enclosure. Using modern drivers, the LS8/1 preserves the superb, even legendary midrange performance of its ancestor but offers much greater dynamic capacity, improved bass performance, and a smooth and extended top end. Compared to the earlier, still available (and less expensive) Derek Hughes modernization of the BC1 idea, the Stirling Broadcast LS3/6 (REG Golden Ear 2021), the LS8/1 has more bass extension, slightly less lower-midrange warmth, and somewhat more forwardness around 1.5–2kHz, though both speakers fall in the essentially neutral category. The LS8/1 is a worthy tribute to the original BC1 design and an outstanding speaker in contemporary terms, as well. (323)

Fyne Audio F1-8

$10,500

Fyne Audio's premier stand-mount speaker features an 8" IsoFlare bass/midrange driver mated to a 1" magnesium-dome compression tweeter, forming a time-aligned coaxial transducer. Its treble range is clean, detailed, and naturally balanced once the Presence Control is properly dialed in. What is nearly magical is its holistic presentation of the musical spectrum. Expect to be drawn into the music aided by a midrange of superb clarity and nearly electrostatic transient speed. And if imaging is a high priority, you're bound to fall in love with the F1-8. It is capable of generating an exceptionally wide and deep soundstage with precisely focused image outlines. A gem of a loudspeaker that delivers on the promise of a time-aligned point-source design. (320)

YG Acoustics Peaks Tor

$10,500 (dedicated Tor stands $1500/pr.)

When YG Acoustics was sold in 2017 by founder Yoav Geva, manufacturing remained at a newly enlarged facility in Arvada, Colorado, while R&D was taken over by a team led by Dr. Matthew Webster in Cambridge, England. An early goal was to develop a loudspeaker line that was more affordable than the Carmel, Hailey, and Sonja models beloved by well-heeled audiophiles, and thus the Peaks product range was born. A resin-fiber material is utilized for the enclosure, save for the front baffle, which is still aluminum like YG's pricier offerings. The Tor is the larger of two Peaks stand-mounts, a 2-way employing YG's ForgeCore tweeter and a 7" BilletCore woofer machined from a solid block of aluminum. The human voice is exceptionally well-served; bass reproduction is more substantial than might be anticipated from a speaker of this size. The Tors parse timbral and dynamic nuance beautifully and—within reason— enthusiastic volume levels are handled with assurance. (337)

MBL 126

$14,800 (stands, $1490)

Musicality, transparency, and astounding spatiality underscore the brilliant MBL 126 Radialstrahler, the extraordinary little sister to the MBL 120. The sonics of this omnidirectional

stand-mount are characterized by sweeping ambience retrieval, 3D-like immersion, and seamless top-to-bottom frequency response. As only an omni can, the 126 approaches the complex relationship between imaging, soundstaging, and envelopment in ways direct-radiating transducers often only hint at but rarely attain. Orchestral music assumes a naturalism and spine-tingling immediacy akin to the real thing. Low-level resolution and sensitivity to dynamic gradients abound. As a four-driver three-way, credit the superb carbon-fiber radial-mid and -tweeter drivers for spinning the sonic silk. Both are grainless, airy, and harmonious. Crafted and finished with extreme precision and taste, the MBL 126, though small in footprint, makes a grand sonic statement. (320)

Yamaha NS-5000

$14,999

While looking nearly identical to the legendary Yamaha NS-1000, the NS-5000 is in fact something quite new, packed with plenty of unique and well-considered technologies. Zylon, one of the world's strongest fibers, is used for the membranes of all three drivers, presenting an identical and nearly ideal combination of stiffness and damping at all frequencies. Internally, tuned "J"-shaped resonators replace broadband cabinet stuffing to target unwanted low-frequency resonances, while two resonance-suppression chambers attach to the backs of midrange and tweeter to deal with higher-frequency resonant modes. The NS-5000s are characterized by a nearly Quad ESL-like unforced, natural, and open midrange/treble. The bass provides a scale and fullness one would expect from a much larger speaker. (308)

Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille

$15,600

The star attraction here is a solid-wood conical horn with an impressive dynamic range. A 1" compression driver covers the

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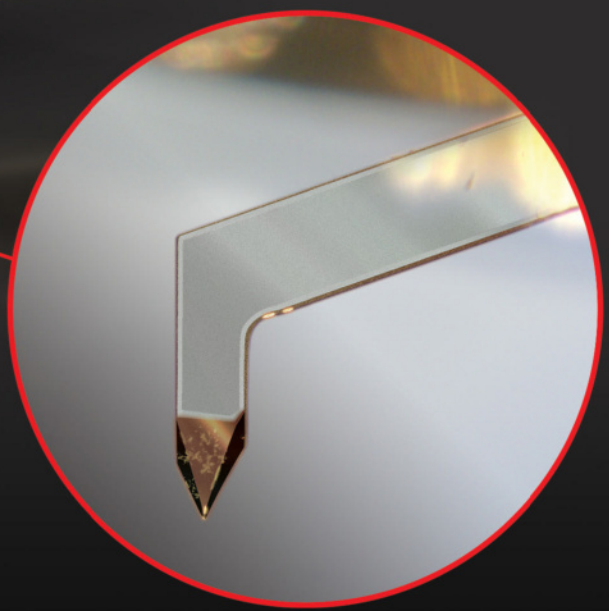

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frequency range to below 2kHz while an 8" woofer fills in the frequency range below 1500Hz. Listening height is a critical factor to obtaining the most accurate tonal balance. Ideally, your ears should be at the tweeter axis or slightly above it. The midrange is full-bodied and felicitous of cello timbre, while the upper octaves sound just a tad recessed relative to the core of the midrange. Best of all, the DeVille is capable of breathtaking transient clarity and soundstage transparency. Its ability to resolve detail in a complex mix is exemplary. High sensitivity (94dB) and a flat impedance curve make the DeVille easy to drive. DO's current favorite in the two-way stand-mount category. (309)

Harbeth M40.3 XD

$18,990/$20,990 depending on finish plus stands

Both M40.2 iterations of Harbeth's Monitor M40 loudspeaker immediately preceding this XD ("eXtended definition") version exhibited a slight shelf-down beginning around 1kHz. For the M40.3 XD, which replaces all previous Monitor 40 models, Harbeth owner and designer Alan Shaw eliminated the shelf-down by raising the level of the tweeter 0.5–0.75dB relative to the midrange. This change doesn't make the speaker "bright" or in any way detract from the storied "drop-dead gorgeous" Harbeth midrange—it simply eliminates the slight shelf-down and also reaps small benefits in transparency and coherence. In other words, a truly great loudspeaker is now an even more accurate and reliable monitor than before. It is one of the two best, large, dynamic three-ways with which PS has had long exposure and remains his reference loudspeaker, not just for reviewing but for the sheer pleasure of the music it reproduces. Stand-mounting required. (342)

Graham LS5/5 Monitor

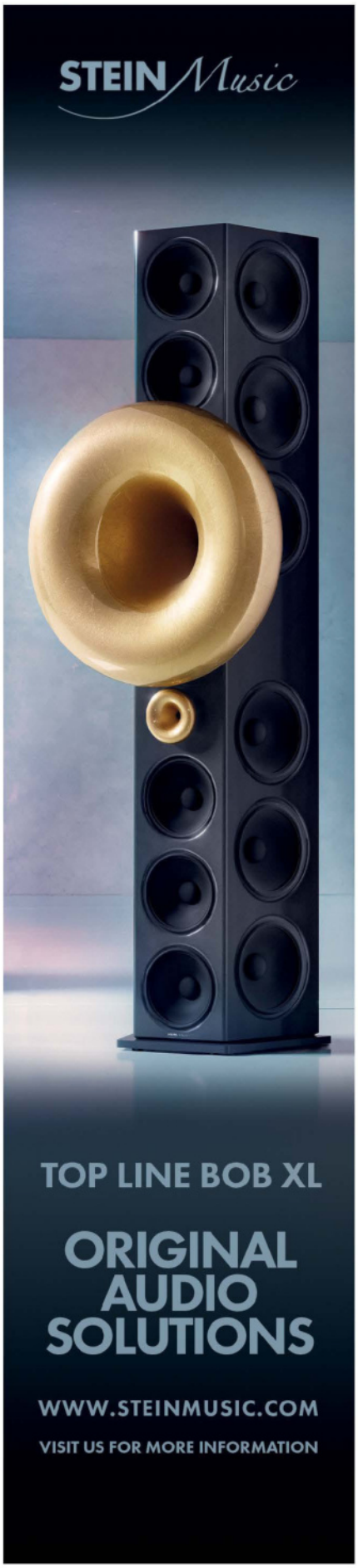
$20,000

Based on a loudspeaker originally designed by the British Broadcasting Corporation in the mid-Sixties, the 5/5 is a three-way that, by slot-loading the midrange and woofer for wider, smoother, more even axial response, manages the difficult trick of a uniform frequency response across an approximately 60-degree window while at the same time realizing state-of-the-art imaging and a commandingly impressive dynamic range that will exceed the requirements of most music listeners in anything short of really large listening rooms. Bass response is deep enough to obviate the need for a subwoofer, while the overall tonal balance is such that day after day on recording after recording over several months the 5/5 left reviewer PS feeling he was hearing back to original sources in a way he's experienced with very few speakers. PS judges it the finest three-way, cone-based loudspeaker in his experience and one of the finest period. (331)

Raidho TD1.2

$23,000 Black/$26,000 Walnut Burl

This wonderful mini-monitor plays music with a lot more dynamic impact, control, and sonic heft than it should be able to muster given its size. Its robust sound could easily be mistaken for that of a small-to-medium floorstander. It recreates a large, airy soundscape filled with well-defined images in a coherent contextual whole. High resolution without sounding forced is the TD1.2's main strength. It also allows all kinds of music to retain their verve and beauty and thereby makes listening a real pleasure, despite the inevitable two-way limits in low-frequency extension and dynamic range. With Raidho's updated ribbon tweeter and a



new tantalum-diamond mid/woofer, this complete redesign (by Benno Meldegaard) of the venerable D1 is expensive, but the TD1.2 is for the enthusiast of fine mini-monitors, who appreciates the strengths—and accepts the weaknesses—of the genre and is willing to acquire one of the best available. (304)

MBL 120

$26,500 (stands $2080)

Yes, it looks remarkably similar to the classic 'droid silhouette of the MBL 121. But the 120 has higher damping and rigidity, and a massively reinforced cabinet with twice the volume of the 121—large enough to increase the diameter of the push-push, side-firing woofers. But it's the seamless frequency response of the 120 that represents its greatest improvement. This speaker spins silk from top to bottom but especially in its grainless treble. Imaging and soundstage replication are also more precise. And midbass integration, a weakness of the 121, is much improved in the 120, not to mention it achieves an easy half-octave or more of low bass. The finest compact Radialstrahler yet. (228)

ACTIVE FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

DALI Rubicon 6 C

$8798

DALI's Rubicon 6 C is the largest of four powered-loudspeakers offered by the Danish manufacturer, a 2.5-way floorstander. The tweeter is a soft-dome/ribbon hybrid that's fast and extended, smoothly blending with the drivers below. The two cone midrange/woofers employ a material for the pole piece called "Soft Magnetic Compound" (SMC) that has standard magnetic properties but virtually no electrical conductivity, which eliminates hysteresis-related distortion. A compact streaming preamp (the "Sound Hub") is part of the package; it wirelessly pairs to the loudspeakers, a reliable and sonically invisible connection. The system doesn't play favorites with musical genres. Power pop, small group jazz, opera, female vocals—everything is reproduced with natural detail and abundant character. (315)

ATC SCM50 ASLT

$24,499

The tower version of the famed pro monitor, the three-way, tri-amplified SCM50 ASLT has an ease and neutrality that are underscored by three key properties, One, midrange presence and immediacy. Two, midband speed that borders on electrostatic territory. And three, a staggeringly wide dynamic envelope that easily puts electrostatics and most cone loudspeakers of this size to shame. The vocal and piano images it creates are of such fluency and liquidity that they seemed to materialize players in the room—a transducer that captures harmonics, timbre, and dynamic potency and nuance in a way that can elicit shivers. Bass response plummets effortlessly into the mid-30-cycle range. Is active for everyone? Maybe not. But for enthusiasts willing to open their minds just a bit, ATC might be the first call you should make. (290)

Eikon Audio Image1

$25,000 (includes Eikontrol and cables)

This integrated system from high-end legend Gayle Sanders breaks new ground in audio-system architecture. Consisting of two speakers and the Eikontrol electronics, the Eikon Image1 system employs sophisticated DSP to correct fundamental problems of speakers in

The art of precision engineering

As a passionate music lover, Ole Klifoth was a regular visitor to venues and concerts all over Copenhagen. Yet he found himself unable to recreate the same electrifying sense of soul, emotion and atmosphere on his stereo at home.

Unable to find a speaker that truly captured the purity he believed a speaker should deliver, Ole could have simply shrugged, accepted the situation, and compromised his love for sound. But that was never going to happen. Ole decided to bring the live concert experience to the living room and in doing so, he created Audiovector.

"I took a student loan, and by trial and error and never knowing when to stop, I created the first Audiovector speaker on my kitchen table. For me, hearing a great speaker is the same as seeing a superlative piece of art. You just know when it's perfect."

***Ole Klifoth**, Founder of Audiovector*

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Dynamic Feed Forward Filters. Uncompromising low-resistance, high-precision coils and capacitors.

Air Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeters. Delivering a wider, deeper, higher and more natural soundstage that highlights advanced detail.

Tilted Plinth. A built-in steel spring decouples the speakers from the floor for a more articulate and exact sound.

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rooms. Each speaker incorporates four power amplifiers and is driven by four line-level analog outputs from the Eikontrol. With two 8" woofers (one rear-firing), a 5" midrange, and an air-motion transformer tweeter in a diminutive multifaceted floorstanding enclosure, the Image produces a much bigger sound than its size suggests. The "Wavelet" DSP corrects timing information in the bass, realizing greatly improved clarity and definition. The Image1 is technically innovative, highly musical, and an exceptional value. (304)

Paradigm Persona 9H

$37,000

Along with the Legacy speakers, the Persona 9H is a product from one of only two manufacturers AHC has found that can really do DSP room correction well. The 9H is truly flat, has very deep, quick, and detailed bass, and a superb new beryllium midrange and tweeter that possess a great deal of life and detail but no hardness. With excellent driver integration and something much closer to a point-source sound than most complex speaker systems, the 9H provides some of the best imaging and soundstage performance around. Pricey at $375k, but the sound quality really delivers, and its size and weight are far more practical than that of many contenders for the state of the art. (273)

YG Acoustics Vantage Live

$65,000

This ambitious new integrated system combines amplification, DACs, and streaming capabilities with YG's Vantage loudspeakers. Just plug the pair of speakers and a small control box into wall power, run a pair of thin ST-Type optical cables, connect to a network, and you can begin streaming from your phone or tablet (streaming subscription required) with the excellent Roon interface. The system delivers superb sound quality, playing much bigger than its size would suggest in bass extension, dynamic contrasts, and soundstaging. But the YG does something special, producing a feeling of "something" being removed between you and the music. The Vantage Live has a crystalline clarity, a dynamic verve, and an immediacy that are striking. Part of this quality is due to the speaker's overall voicing, which has a decidedly extroverted personality. The midrange is projected forward in front of the speakers rather than laying back. The Vantage Live brings true high-end performance to those music lovers who want uncompromised sound without the complexity and system clutter of separates. (331)

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

PSB Alpha T20

$799

PSB takes budget seriously, and the short-tower two-way T20 is a serious ground-up redesign. It targets the essentials of musicality first and lets everything else fall tunefully into place. A very approachable, high-output speaker, its overall character retains PSB's familiar—and welcome—warmish slant. Midrange integrity has improved, as has dynamic output and low-level resolution. Driver coherence is excellent, as per PSB tradition. Bass response is solid, though the midbass is not always as sharply controlled or pitch specific as that of more elaborate offerings (though the T20 never veers too far astray). Staging could be more dimensional, and the T20 is a bit dry on top but never dull. The perfect way to impress those highfalutin' audio friends. (302)

Magnepan LRS+

$995 (Maggie stands, $289)

The original Little Ribbon Speaker got praised unqualifiedly by just about everyone who reviewed it, except for JV. Oh, it was and is extremely lifelike in the midrange (as all Maggies are), but the first-gen LRS didn't have much bass and its treble was rough, brightish, and limited in extension, making for a less than robust and seamless top-to-bottom balance. For the money, the LRS was (and is) a very good deal, but it had "issues." Comes now the updated LRS+ (with its own stout, must-buy steel stands), and those things JV had reservations about in the original—in the low end and on top—have been ameliorated. From about 60Hz through the low-to-mid treble, the new LRS+ is a phenomenal loudspeaker. No, it doesn't have quite the stage height, image size, low-end reach, dynamic range, and uncannily natural tone color of its closest competition in the Maggie line, the superb MG 1.7i, but for smallish spaces (even for medium-sized) ones at less-than-thunderous volumes it is gonna be very hard to beat in sheer absolute-sound realism from the midbass up. (331)

DALI Oberon 5

$1499

Stretching the sonic limits in the lower-cost, small-floorstander category, DALI's three-driver, two-way, bass-reflex Oberon 5 strikes a satisfyingly warmer tonal balance, offering good extension and timing, and well-focused detail. Output is robust with a wealth of timbral cues and colors in the midrange. The high frequencies are smooth, although a bit dry and perhaps a tad shaded. Singers are reproduced with a pleasing flesh-on-the-bone physicality, accompanied with lively presence. The Oberon 5 won't venture deeply into the bottom octave, but there

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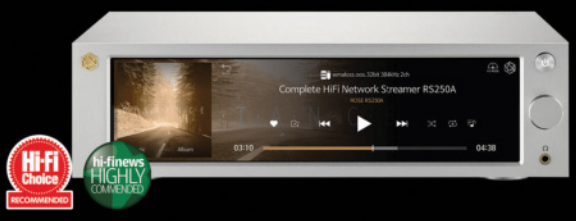

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- Andrew Everard, HiFi News

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is enough oomph in the midbass to suggest some grandeur. An economical yet formidable speaker that with few concessions permits users to toe the line of everyday practicality, while still allowing their audiophile hearts to lead the way. (297)

Monitor Audio Bronze 500

$1650

The two-and-a-half-way Bronze 500s are extremely nice looking, very simple and modern, and designed for a wide range of room sizes, shapes, and system budgets. They include a 25mm C-Cam Gold Dome tweeter with a Uniform Dispersion waveguide, and two 8" C-Cam mid/bass drivers. Nominal impedance is listed at 8 ohms and sensitivity at 90dB, which means these won't need a massive amount of power to reach listening levels. Sonically, they're packed with stratospheric lushness—a sound much bigger than their modest size and weight suggests. From delicate strings to solid-bodied bass lines, the Bronze 500s were a consistent pleasure across all genres and formats and should be on the radar of anyone building a new system or looking to upgrade. (327)

Sonus faber Lumina III

$2399

The Lumina III are tall and thin, sit on a square black base, and consist primarily of a narrow tower wrapped in sumptuous leather with a beautifully finished hunk of multilayered wood for the front baffle. In terms of drivers, the Lumina III includes a 1.15" (29mm) Damped Apex Dome tweeter, a 5.9" (150mm) natural-fiber and paper blend mid/woofer, and two 5.9" paper-pulp cone woofers. The sensitivity is rated at 89dB, and the nominal impedance is 4 ohms. The Lumina IIIs were revealing and accurate in a way that allowed the music to sound lifelike—no distorted uppers, no booming lowers, no veiled mids. They're physically beautiful, compact, forgiving on gear, easy to set up, and sound fantastic. (326)

Monitor Audio Silver 300 7G

$2850

The Silver 300 7G is the seventh generation of Monitor Audio's popular and affordably priced Silver Series. This handsome, columnar, three-way midsize was an easy, amiable speaker to settle in with. It had an inviting personality that was warmly energetic, but seriously propulsive when called for. Its romantic-leaning signature portrayed a midrange that was full and ripe. Transients played out as naturalistic—assertive but not strident. Bass response was solid, dipping into the 40Hz range with gusto and, in some instances, going perceivably lower. Capable of meeting the demands of symphonic music, Silver 300 sets a very high standard for a modestly priced floorstander, and with its stylish good looks it can easily slip into a den or living space without requiring a major design overhaul. (324)

Fyne Audio F501

$2875 ($3125 in gloss black)

Built in the Tannoy tradition by ex-Tannoy employees, the F501 looks and feels like a brilliantly executed mature product. Fyne's coaxial driver is built around a rigid cast-aluminum chassis with the tweeter, a titanium dome, located in the throat of the midrange/woofer cone to achieve point-source acoustic coherency. The bass response is augmented by a 6" woofer operating up to a frequency of 250Hz. The F501 is easy to listen to over long listening sessions. There isn't even a hint of gratuitous brightness, but careful front-end matching is required to mitigate a slight upper-midrange dip. It seems to prefer solid-state amplification for best bass performance and delivers outstanding detail resolution, midband clarity, and spectacular imaging. Add excellent transient speed and control to the sonic mix, and what you end up with is a mighty fine loudspeaker. (304)

Magnepan MG 1.7i

$2995 (Maggie stands, $289)

In Issue 307 JV selected this tall, skinny, three-way, full-range, quasi-ribbon, dipole floorstander as one of his favorite loudspeakers of the last seventy years. High in resolution, low in distortion, with enough bass and treble (of superlatively high quality) to satisfy anyone save a head-banger and a midrange that reproduces well-recorded voices and acoustic instruments with jaw-dropping realism, it is one of those "sweet spot" wonders that pops up once in a decade or two. The 1.7i gives you a generous taste of everything its bigger and more expensive Maggie brothers are capable of for a tiny fraction of what you'd pay for the same wonderment in a top-line dynamic speaker. A genuine classic. (313)

KEF R11 Meta

$2999

A three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, the R11 has four 5" aluminum woofers and the same size Uni-Q concentric array (5" midrange with 1" vented aluminum dome tweeter) found in KEF's Reference and Blade speakers. It also has a Tangerine waveguide to improve upper-end frequency dispersion. By design, the KEF R11 delivers a kind of purity or neutrality to the sound that can often reveal finer details that result in greater accuracy and realism—attributes that aren't found every day in more approachably priced speakers. The R11s seemingly play well with various amps and within home-theater setups, as well. But it is their top-to-bottom coherence and even dispersion that helped the R11 sound less like speakers and more like music itself. (298, 342)

Polk L600

$3498

The Polk L600 is an imposing loudspeaker at its price. It is massive, beautifully designed, and wonderfully finished with woodgrain sides and a smooth baffle. The sound is deep and tight, with a fantastic low end that kicks with real effect. Its midrange is smooth and pleasant, and the high end has a nice sparkle, thanks to the Pinnacle ring tweeter. But it's the realistic bass that makes the L600 stand out: kick drums have surprising weight and impact without becoming muddled, perhaps due to Polk's enhanced Power Port. A real winner and a great value at this price level. (324)

Paradigm Founder 80F

$3900

A fantastic all-around speaker with the finest sound Muse Kastanovich has ever had in his home, and luxurious looks, too. A 2½-way floorstander with 1" AL-MAC tweeter, 6" AL-MAG mid/bass cone, and two more 6" Carbon-X bass cones, the 80F incorporates a wealth of technological, material, and design advancements, including shock-mounted driver and feet vibration decoupling, an application-engineered material for each driver type, and a complex non-rectangular cabinet with extensive internal bracing to increase rigidity and break up standing waves. Detail, resolution, and dynamics were all off the scale, and the bass was ample, considering it is the smallest of the Founder Series floorstanders. (324)

Vandersteen 2Ce Signature III

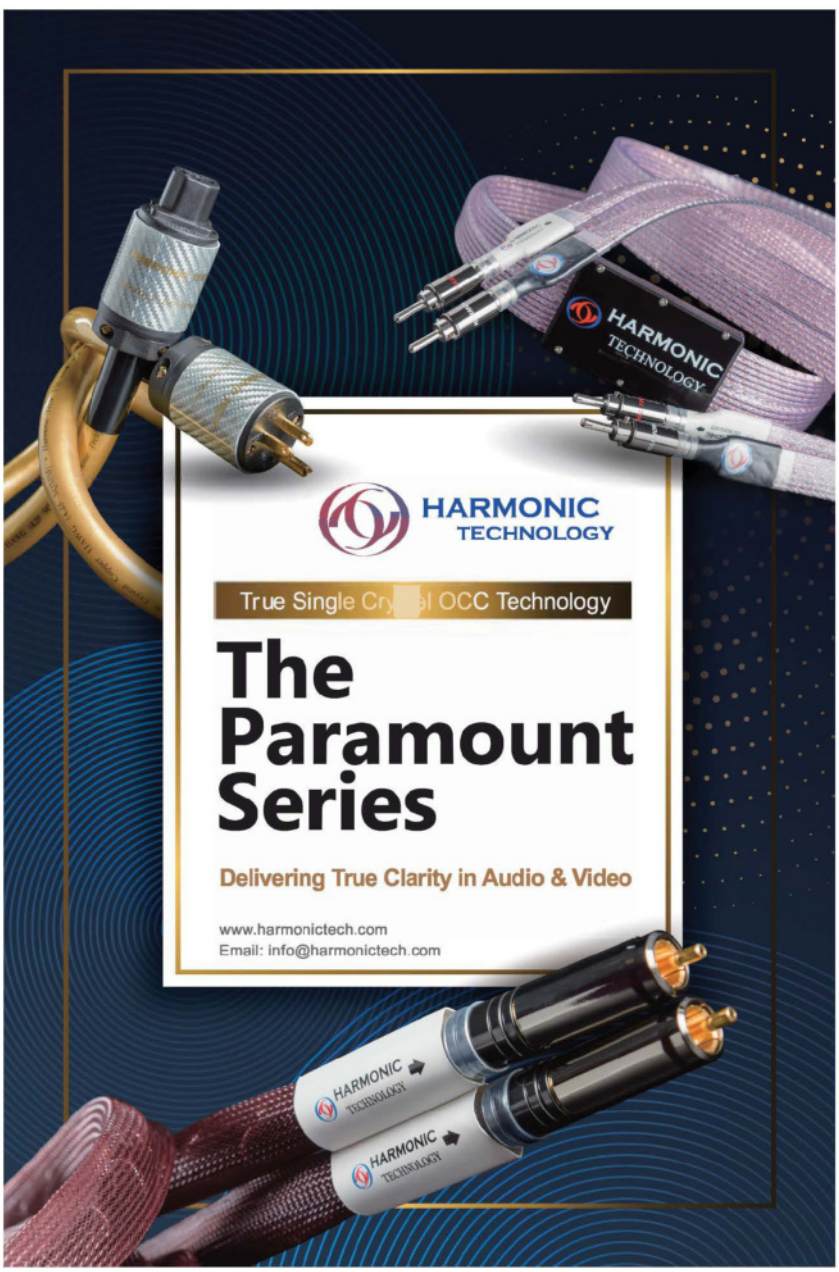
$3900 (including stands)

The Vandersteen 2Ce is the classic three-way floorstander, delivering excellent top-to-bottom balance and engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. It benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. The first-order crossovers essential to time-coherent performance somewhat limit maximum sound-pressure levels. In continuous production in eight iterations since 1977, more than 100,000 pairs have been sold. A genuine classic. (139, 122)

Larsen Model 6.2/Model 8

$4500/$7900

Like its smaller and bigger siblings, the two-way Larsen 6.2 is designed to be positioned against a wall, facing forward, which vastly simplifies the process of room placement. Early reflections from the speaker's backwave are eliminated. Additionally, the drivers face inwards and upwards, which addresses the issue of the first sidewall reflection. Tonal accuracy, detail, and spatiality are exemplary. The requirement to site the Larsens near a boundary also contributes substantially to their surprisingly (for their size) potent bass performance, though a powerful



amplifier—think 150-to-200Wpc—assures the best results in this regard. The larger Larsen Model 8 is also designed to be placed against the rear wall, thus eliminating the rear-wall reflection. Orchestras sound surprisingly like orchestras, with a transparency that doesn't just go down into the midrange but all the way to the bass. Images are very solid, but the focus is different from free-space speakers, being either more "dimensional" or less precise, depending on one's viewpoint. (276, 251)

Bowers & Wilkins 703 S3

$5999

The B&W 703 S3 speakers are a pair of beautifully finished—and fantastic-sounding—3-way, vented, box-style floorstanders, which feature a slightly curved forward baffle, a dedicated Continuum decoupled midrange cone, and two Aerofoil bass cones. They're impeccably styled, stand at 44" tall, and weigh a solid 63.5 pounds each. Their upper range, in particular, sounded crisp, shimmering, and sharp, thanks to the signature decoupled carbon-dome tweeter sitting at the top, a trickle-down from higher in B&W's line. It's a piece of solid-milled aluminum with that swept-back shape meant to limit diffraction, and it performed admirably. The midrange was neutral-to-warm, smooth, and extremely pleasant, and the bass was tight without blowing down the doors. Overall, the B&W 703 S3s sounded fantastic playing a wide range of music, from laid-back jazz to big, aggressively complex electronica. (342)

Audiovector QR 7

$6500

The QR 7 is the largest loudspeaker in Audiovector's entry-level QR series, a line of products developed with the goal of delivering the best possible sound to an audiophile constituency on a budget. Audiovector CEO Mads Klifoth and his father Ole, the company's founder and still its main designer, have identified 20 "golden rules of speaker design." All 20 are observed in the Danish brand's top models; the QR 7 incorporates 10 of these parameters —AMT tweeter, sandwich construction for driver membranes, 7-nines copper wiring, etc. Clearly, the Klifoths have prioritized well as the QR 7 has no glaring shortcomings. Reproduction of the extremes of the frequency spectrum, dynamic punch with rock, natural blend with choral and chamber music, coherence and intelligibility with complex big band charts—all exceed expectations. If your musical taste is eclectic, this is a loudspeaker choice that won't disappoint with any specific genre—and won't break the bank. (335)

Vandersteen 3A Signature

$6850 (includes stands)

Like all Vandersteens, the Golden Ear Award-winning 3A Signature is time-and-phase accurate. Its driver complement features the patented midrange and tweeter used in the vaunted Vandersteen 5. The 3A Signature has a relaxed presentation, is musically seductive, and will appeal to those who want to forget about the sound and enjoy the music, though it does trade off some dynamic contrast and midrange resolution for its overall ability to involve the listener. (139, 122)

Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2

$7000

The entry-level floorstander from Rosso Fiorentino is a two-and-a-halfway design employing dual 6.5" midrange/woofers mated to a 1" silk-dome tweeter. Sonically, the Elba exudes refinement and classical elegance, eschewing a forward and aggressive presentation in favor of musical expressiveness. This speaker beautifully portrays music's very fine timbral structure, revealing a warmth and richness in instruments and voices that comes closer to the real thing than any $7k speaker has a right to. The Elba 2 may sound a little dark through the midrange compared to similarly priced competitors, but this tonal balance is much closer to live music than the threadbare timbres and bleached tone colors that so often passes for "clarity" and "resolution." The Elba 2 puts the listener at ease, inviting him into the music in a way that even some far more expensive speakers fail to do. The Elba 2 isn't a great loudspeaker for the price. It's a great loudspeaker, period. (315)

Cabasse Murano Alto

$7190

A gem of a floorstander, this three-way four-driver floorstander conveyed a full-bodied, room-filling, vividly present character—and a warmer signature that delivers a slightly darker and more romantic sound, rather than a dry or clinical one. Not quite full range in bass extension, it proved ideal for medium-sized spaces. Murano Alto plays it right down the middle, emphasizing midrange energy and output. No unsettling frequency droops or upper midrange suck-outs that squeeze energy and liveliness out of the music. Its strong power response and off-axis performance lend it the ability to maintain its voicing across a wide soundstage, even with listeners who are outside the sweet spot. In a perfect world it could use a bit more air movement in the treble and upper midrange, but overall it has the balance of performance, musicality, and polished good looks that should appeal to a wide variety of enthusiasts. (339)

Gradient 1.4

$7650

As in the original Gradient models decades ago, the bass here is generated by a floor-firing woofer, giving half-space directivity. Further up, the mids and highs are produced by a coaxial mid/tweeter assembly in a flow-resistance spherical

enclosure, which attenuates the back radiation. The result is a speaker with remarkable indifference to the room around it and an almost uncanny ability to "disappear" as an apparent source. Unusual but elegant in appearance, these relatively small speakers produce abundant sound for rooms of moderate size with excellent balance and superb stereo behavior. Sadly, this will be Jorma Salmi's final design contribution to the world of audio (he died in 2018). Salmi's designs (this one jointly with his son Atte Salmi) were always works of startling but successful acoustic originality; this is his final masterpiece. (330)

GoldenEar Triton One.R

$7990

The three-way One.R is a true full-range loudspeaker, loaded with heaps of drivers (three 5" x 9" subwoofers, four 7" x 10" passive radiators, two 5.25" mid/basses, and one folded-ribbon tweeter) that deliver a real wallop. Nice-looking as well as almost unbelievably great sounding (particularly at their relatively modest price), the One.R bowled reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn over. Coming off his three-quarter-of-a-million-dollar Wilson WAMMs, JH wasn't sure what to expect. But he was immediately smitten by the One. Rs planar-like qualities, phenomenal soundstaging, high transparency to sources, sheer airiness in the treble, astonishing resolution, and superb bass. "In selecting the name GoldenEar for his company, Gross has set a high bar," Jacob concluded. "With the Triton One.R he easily clears it." (298)

Living Voice Auditorium R25A

$8500

The two-way, three-driver (in a D'Appolito configuration) Living Voice R25A floorstanders are a well-chosen compromise in the inevitable trade-offs among size, sensitivity, and bass power and extension. They are sensitive enough to be driven by quite small amounts of power, small enough to fit gracefully into ordinary domestic environments, and they have enough bass extension and volume capability to be quite satisfying for most types of music. The R25As are the careful work of British designer Kevin Scott, refined over a long period of time (25 years, thus their name) and aimed at a specific aesthetic in sound, as is any serious speaker design. In this case, the aesthetic seems to include the maximization of midrange life in a speaker that is, even so, nearly full range, moderate in size, and high enough in sensitivity to be driven by lower-power amplifiers. At a reasonable listening distance, the speaker becomes very coherent and of a piece. The sound is very "un-speaker-like." These descriptions may seem like standard audio-review boilerplate, but in this instance, they are actually true. The long work in adjusting crossovers and choosing crossover parts seems to have paid off—something has paid off, in any case. (337)

Magnepan MG 3.7i

$8795

Maggie's three-way, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon planar 3.7i successfully addresses three issues that have long vexed "true-ribbon" Maggies: the seamless integration of that ribbon with the other planar-magnetic drivers; the retention of detail and dynamic range at relatively low volume levels; and the reduction of "Maggie graininess." The solution to these problems combined with the famous virtues of true-ribbon Magnepans (neutrality, low distortion, high resolution, superb transient response, lifelike timbres, and natural imaging and soundstaging) produce what is, in JV's opinion, one of the best buys in a high-fidelity transducer regardless of price, provided you have enough amp to drive the 3.7i, and the space to house it. Note that the 3.7i does not produce deep bass below about 45Hz and, like all planars, runs into

membrane-excursion limits, slightly limiting dynamic range (particularly in the bass) at extremely high SPLs. (Forthcoming)

PSB Synchrony T600

$8999

Hailing from Canada, the T600 is the latest brainchild of longtime PSB designer Paul Barton. It features a tuneful midrange and precise, if limited, bass. The most remarkable aspect of this floorstander is its sweet pellucid treble. A seductive top end is probably the last thing you would expect from a titanium-dome tweeter, but the T600 sails through complex passages with nary a smidgen of elevated treble. Instead, it's a supremely linear and precise loudspeaker that punches well above its weight. The T600 offers many of the qualities of a fine mini-monitor with more heft and palpability. (323)

Sonner Audio Legato Duo

$9500

The Legato Duo from Boston-based Sonner Audio has an invitingly warmish signature that makes music more listenable than challenging. The mids are accurate in timbre, and the presence range is articulate without veering into forwardness. Transients are fast—crash cymbal, hi-hats, snare drum snaps, flat-picked instruments spring forth with a sparkle that conjures the real thing. And solo violin has a nice balance of bowing and attack without any sacrifice in the resonant sweetness of the body of the instrument. The Legato Duo never overreaches in the upper octaves; nor is it prone to excess sibilance. Low-frequency response extends fairly steeply, albeit with a bit of compression, but the drivers still move a notable amount of air, giving the Legato Duo a heavier footprint than might be expected. A fine debut and a welcome addition to the high-end neighborhood. (293)

Vandersteen Treo CT

$10,690

A loudspeaker of uncommon musicality and precision. Built upon the R&D that gave birth to the flagship Model Seven, the four-driver, medium-scale Treo CT conveys a single-driver-like coherence that immerses the listener in the very moment the recording was captured. It combines uncanny image specificity, color, and texture with an enveloping sense of air and immersiveness. At least some credit must go to the Model Seven-derived CT (carbon tweeter), which is as transparent and open as it is extended. Basically, a passive version of the Quatro Wood CT, the Treo may not have quite the bass slam of that model, but you'd hardly miss it due to its unflappable resolution of pitch. A true classic. (262)

MartinLogan Impression ESL 11A

$12,000

The 11A is the third from the top in MartinLogan's Masterpiece series, replacing the Montis, enthusiastically reviewed by PS. The main advancement in the new model is the incorporation of Anthem DSP room correction in the bass, which makes it possible to achieve exceptionally clean, clear, and powerful low end. A novel sliding-phase network allows for suppression of the backwave. As with the Montis, the integration of dynamic bass drivers with electrostatic arrays is managed with essentially perfect coherence, and all the other familiar ML virtues are in evidence, including life-sized scaling, broad and deep soundstaging, wider than usual dispersion for a paneled array owing to the company's unique "curvilinear" electrostatic elements, and very low apparent distortion. The tonal balance here, however, replaces the Montis' lovely ying-like personality with an altogether more yang-like, even aggressive forwardness; thus, listening before buying is highly recommended. (281)

Audiovector R 3 Arreté

$12,900

The R 3 Arreté is a two-and-a-half-way floorstanding design with an Air-Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woof cones with membranes made of cross-woven Aramid fibers in a sandwich structure. High-frequency reproduction is exceptionally open, extended, and non-fatiguing, most certainly thanks to the AMT tweeter, a pleated membrane with the voice coil bonded to it. Bass is taut and tuneful; with most musical content, the use of a subwoofer isn't even a consideration. Spatiality and transparency are first rate. All Audiovector loudspeakers with the "Arreté" designation offer a proprietary technology called the "Freedom Grounding Concept." Two cables, one from each speaker, join in a Shunko connector that's externally grounded. This serves to reduce motional feedback distortion derived from the woofer baskets. The FGC circuit is standard, but the cable needed to implement it costs an extra $750 over the base price—well worth it. (305)

Sonus faber Olympica Nova III

$15,000

The new ("Nova") versions of the Sonus faber's Olympica line of loudspeakers utilize a construction technique in which multiple layers of bended wood are set into an aluminum exoskeleton to create an exceptionally rigid enclosure. Within this largely resonance-free environment, users can experiment with the positioning of the top-to-bottom "Stealth Ultraflex" resistive port—aiming it toward the center of the room or facing it toward

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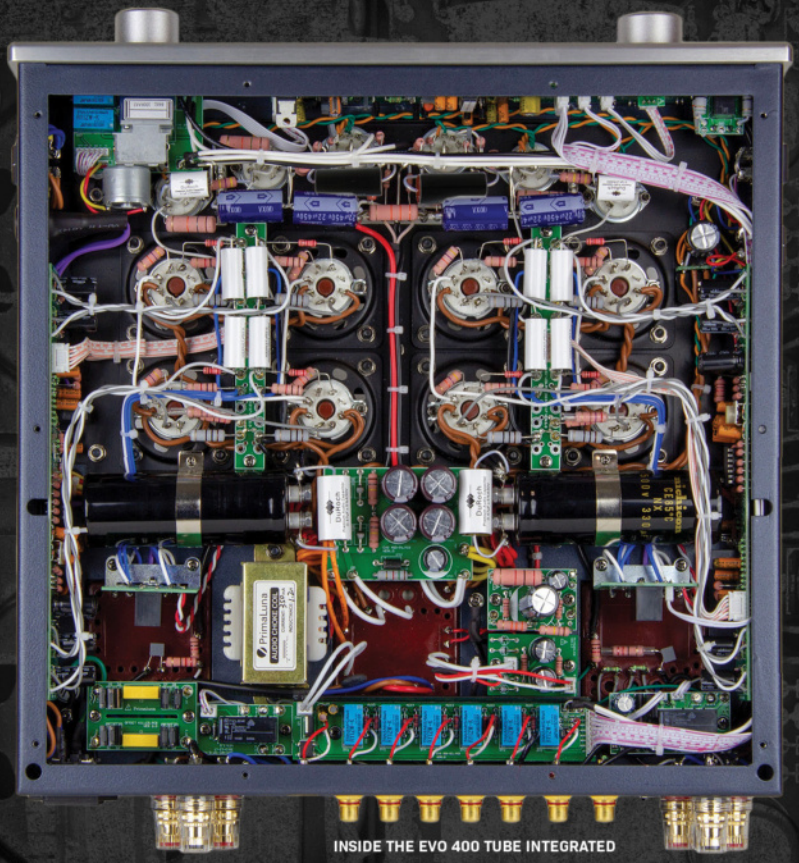

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the sidewalls—to optimize bass performance. The Nova III's three-way, four-driver transducer complement is fully up the task of playing loud and low—dance music, pipe organ, Mahler symphonies—as well as scaling down to deal effectively with more nuanced material like solo violin, an after-hours jazz singer, or a virtuoso pianist. (309)

Larsen Model 9

$16,000

This is the latest and best embodiment (superb drivers and crossover) of the Larsen concept, using wall placement and woofers near the floor combined with wide dispersion of the higher frequencies to generate a sound with minimal early reflections but impressive uniformity over the room. The sound of your listening room is replaced by the sound of the original recording venue to a surprising extent. The speakers need minimal fuss about exact placement and little or no room treatment to achieve independence of the listening room. The Model 9 is superbly finished and surprisingly small, considering its bass power and extension. Domestic compatibility is ensured, along with striking sonic character. (309)

SteinMusic Highline Bobby M

$16,250 (Bobby S available without the woofers for $8125/pr.)

The Bobby M and its myriad configurations are uniquely striking-looking and wonderfully musical-sounding transducers that actually make good sense when you break them down—or, rather, when you put them together. Stein's Bobby speakers are modular: The M (for Medium) designation actually refers to the duo that was reviewed, with one bass extender (with two 6" woofers) under a two-way, bass-reflex monitor with horn-loaded tweeter and 6" cone mid/bass. If you use two bass extenders per channel, with one atop the Bobby S monitor and the second beneath it, you'll have a Bobby L (for Large). Sonically, the High Line Bobby M offered such pleasing and smoothly natural musicality and impressive dispersion. (304)

Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G

$17,900

At $17,900 per pair, these large British floorstanders represent an excellent value—they'll deliver the goods with most genres of music. The substantial enclosure is fabricated from laminated layers of MDF, the front baffle 36mm in thickness. Each speaker sports three retention bolts passing from back to front that the owner can tighten to complement the already substantial anti-resonance properties of the Monitor's cabinet construction. The 300 3G's driver complement includes an Air Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter, which takes the top end out to 60kHz. The 4" midrange and two 8" woofers feature the latest version of Monitor Audio's RDT (Rigid Diaphragm Technology) sound-producing membrane, a sandwich construction with Nomex, aluminum, and carbon-fiber layers. Not surprisingly, the 300 3Gs are unfazed by large-scale symphonic music and high-energy jazz fusion but will also extract subtle instrumental colorations and dynamic gradations when the recording has them. (342)

Wolf von Langa WVL 12639 SON

$17,995

Loudspeakers built by the German manufacturer Wolf von Langa are among the very few modern products that employ field-coil drivers—a technology that was dominant a century ago. At that time, loudspeakers were "electromagnetic"—the magnetism being generated by an external electrical power source. Langa has evolved this process considerably, with a specially designed power supply—now in its fourth generation. A passive radiator, roughly the same size (11") as the front-firing mid/woofer, is mounted to the rear, and the speaker functions as a dipole. The SON is a two-way design. The high-frequency driver is an Air-Motion Transformer (AMT) made for Wolf von Langa by Mundorf; it's mounted in a clear Plexiglass panel atop the mid/bass cabinet for open-air operation. Sonically, the WVL 12639 SON belies its modest size, reproducing large-scale music with authority. Dynamics are excellent from top to bottom. With a 94dB sensitivity, the loudspeakers are easy to drive with low-powered (< 20Wpc) tube amplifiers. The integration of the two drivers is seamless, with both vocal and instrumental tonal signatures represented to near perfection. (333)

Acora SRB

$18,750

Acora's entry-level speaker in its top SR series, the SRB, is a 2-way, ported, stand-mounted model built, like all SR models, out of solid granite. The speaker is one of the most revealing AT has ever heard, telling the whole truth of what's on a recording—and nothing but. Try it with any familiar recording and you're bound to hear some previously unnoticed detail or be better able to distinguish an obscure musical line. At the same time, the SRB's uncompromising nature means that it's not for everyone; if there's a problem with a recording, the Acora won't sugarcoat it. But if you're searching for uncompromising performance—the ultimate in resolution, dynamics, imaging, musically-relevant detail and a surprisingly accomplished low end—in a compact, stand-mounted speaker, the Acora SRB should be on your short list. (337)

Magico S1 Mk II

$19,600, M-Cast ($24,300, M-Coat)

Magico's smallest floorstander sports all the key features seen in the larger models of the California company's S Series—an extruded aluminum enclosure, a diamond-coated beryllium tweeter, and a nanographene mid/bass cone driver. So, it's no surprise that the sonic character (or lack thereof) of the new S1 is highly reminis-

cent of the S3 Mk II and S5 Mk II, as well as, to a significant degree, the exalted Q Series products. The continuity between the two drivers is exceptional—as good as you'll hear in a dynamic loudspeaker design—resulting in excellent imaging and realistic instrumental/vocal reproduction; in addition, bass is well defined and impactful. The price is for the granular anodized M-Cast finish, the higher tariff gets you the high-gloss M-Coat version. (270)

Wilson Audio SabrinaX

$19,700

The SabrinaX is the smallest and least expensive floorstander in the Wilson line. Entry-level, maybe, but there are no observable shortcuts. The SabrinaX has commanding and linear top-to-bottom energy. It's a ripe sound, a relaxed sound, with a slightly warmer signature that may surprise the brand's devotees. It's a Wilson, of course, so the SabrinaX also has remarkable dynamics, outstanding low-level resolution, and the sense that it willfully wants to drive music forward rather than let it passively lay back. The SabrinaX artfully combines low-level resolution with powerful bass dynamics, never losing grip or control. Unsurpassed in a smaller listening room, this may be pound for pound the best Wilson Audio loudspeaker available today. (317)

Magnepan MG 20.7

$19,795

Magneplanar's big, full-range, ribbon/quasi-ribbon dipoles may not be the ideal "fidelity to sources" loudspeakers (transparency to sources is not the strongest suit of dipoles); nor are they the ideal "as you like it" speakers (at least, not for rockers looking for the ultimate in dynamic range and midbass slam). The listeners for whom the 20.7s are very nearly ideal—for whom Magneplanars have always been ideal—are those seeking the absolute sound. These Maggies' magical ability to transport you to a different space and time, and to there realistically recreate (with lifelike scope and size) the sound of acoustic instruments and the venue in which they were recorded, is extraordinary. It almost goes without saying (since these are Magnepans), but the 20.7s are also incredibly good values, although (as with all Maggies) you're going to have to bring a lot of high-quality power to the party, and you're going to need a good deal of room to house two speakers the height and width of a couple of NFL linebackers. (249)

German Physiks HRS-130

$19,900–$28,900 depending on finish

The Unlimited II's bigger brother combines a carbon-fiber Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) with a floor-firing 10" woofer. The DDD is a serious attempt to mimic the coherent soundfield produced by a small radially pulsating cylinder. The design is capable of wide-range operation and by its nature generates an omnidirectional radiation pattern in the horizontal plane. Expect an exceptionally wide sweet spot coupled with palpable image outlines. The HRS-130 is almost perfect for a small-to-medium-sized room,

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providing that the room is acoustically tuned along the lines of live-end/dead-end to sharpen image focus. Solid-state amplification works best to tighten bass lines. Micro-dynamics pop right out of the fabric of the music, making it a breeze to connect with the music's emotions and drama. Midrange textures are capable of exceptional purity. (276)

Magico A5

$26,800

Magico's A5 brings the company's vaunted technologies to a less lofty price. The A5 is a three-way, 5-driver system in a sealed anodized-aluminum enclosure that features materials and construction techniques previously implemented in Magico's top Q series. The three 9" woofers feature Magico's graphene Nano-Tech diaphragms newly modified to even stiffer and lighter levels. The woofers transition to a 5" aluminum-honeycomb-matrix mid/woof and a 28mm beryllium-dome tweeter. The result is a speaker that offers crisp, tight extension down to 24Hz, staggering dynamics for its size, and a lifelike sense of weight and body. The overall presentation is triumphantly cohesive; image accuracy and presence are meticulous. The A5 offers micro-resolution, yet never sounds analytical. A terrific speaker and a great value. (320)

Kharma Elegance EL-S7-1.1-S

$28,000

A loudspeaker for connoisseurs who appreciate the finest the high end can offer. The look is sumptuous, the quality of materials stunning, and the mirror-like finish breathtaking. But it's the sound that truly seduces—ripe with detail and harmonic complexity. Credit is owed to the new beryllium tweeter—a wonderfully coherent match with Kharma's proprietary composite (KCD) woofers. (Say goodbye to Kharma's traditional ceramic drivers.) Ideal for smaller to medium-sized rooms, yet so potent in output and midbass thrust it's easy to forget it's a mere two-way. Like all Kharma speakers the S7 has a micro-dynamic delicacy and resolving power that touch both the head and the heart. (253)

Estelon YB Mk II

$29,000

Estelon's second-least-expensive full-range loudspeaker manifests all the virtues of the Estonian manufacturer's most ambitious products, including a uniquely shaped enclosure fabricated from a proprietary marble composite material. In this non-resonant cabinet, the YB Mk II's three drivers—a ScanSpeak 1" beryllium dome, a ScanSpeak 5.8" sliced-paper cone mid/woofer, and a SEAS 8.6" aluminum woofer, all basically off-the-shelf parts—function optimally, and the Estelon's spatiality may be its strongest selling point. The speakers also excel at the reproduction of the human voice. Unquestionably, the YB Mk IIs function best with substantial high-current amplifiers, which provide the low-end heft and "grip" they're capable of. It must be remarked that the speaker's appearance is absolutely stunning, winning the YB model a Red Dot international design award in 2017. (320)

Legacy Audio Aeris with Wavelet II Processor

$29,515 with Wavelet II DSP Room Correction System

The Legacy Aeris sports extraordinary drivers and cabinet design matched to advanced electronics that provide DSP room compensation and the ability to select a wide range of equalization settings for given types of recordings. The Aeris provides outstanding

performance at every frequency to the limits of hearing and beyond. Add in excellent definition, dynamics, and a visual image that might win it an entry in New York's Museum of Modern Art. It has built-in 500W subwoofer amplifiers that provide powerful, room-filling bass, with a crossover point low enough to still get the best sound out of your regular power amplifier. The mix of other drivers provides a coherent and naturally detailed soundstage, as well as enough dipole radiation to widen the stage and give it more natural ambience. The electronics and software allow the Aeris' response to be adjusted to be as musically realistic as possible in any real-world listening room. Includes advanced Wavelet II DSP processor. (235/269)

YG Acoustics Carmel 3

$29,800

The Carmel 2, recently updated to the Carmel 3, doesn't just defy expectations; it shatters them. Elegantly curved at the waist, the speaker is more stylish and graceful than a speaker its size has any right to be. Moreover, the fit and finish are breathtaking, right down to the complete absence of visible joints, seams, or screws. The biggest surprises come when you consider that the Carmel 2 is an aluminum-bodied, sealed-box design that sounds nothing like similarly designed speakers. Aluminum enclosures are prone to ringing unless heavily damped, which in turn can lead to sonics as dead as the treated cabinet. YG avoids this pitfall by eschewing all damping in favor of proprietary anti-resonance devices. The result is a speaker that is both physically inert and sonically alive. Over the entire frequency spectrum, transients, decays, imaging, and rhythmic drive are first rate. For those building a compact reference system, the Carmel's petite dimensions, ability to throw a tall, broad soundstage, and placement versatility make it particularly well suited to such a role. (320, Carmel 3 not yet reviewed)

PS Audio Aspen FR30

$29,999

After nearly 50 years as an electronics specialist, PS Audio has entered the loudspeaker arena with the impressive FR30. The speaker features a unique industrial design along with custom planar midrange and tweeter units designed specifically for the FR30. A wide band of midrange frequencies is reproduced by a 10" planar-magnetic driver with a Teonext diaphragm. Bass is handled by four forward-firing 8" woofers augmented with four 10" side-mounted passive radiators. A rear-firing tweeter with its own level control rounds out the driver complement. The sound from the planar midrange and tweeters is superb, with outstanding resolution of detail, particularly during low-level passages where the FR30 revealed every musical nuance. Even when playing loudly, the FR30's midrange and treble showed no signs of hardening. Reviewer AHC thought the FR30 produced the best midrange and treble from any loudspeaker he's heard. The technology of its bass drivers, passive radiators, cabinet, and crossover also produced some of the smoothest, best integrated, and musically realistic bass AHC has heard. (331)

TAD Evolution One TX

$30,500

Standing roughly four feet tall on its spiked outrigger base, this 3-way bass-reflex design features a 1" beryllium dome tweeter that is mounted coaxially within a 3.5" midrange cone, making for a better off-axis listening experience. Two 6.3" woofers with membranes fabricated from a laminated material of aramid fabric and raw fibers complete the driver complement. All the transducers are made from scratch by TAD. Slit-shaped ports on both lateral surfaces of the Evolution One TX contribute to its flexibility in room placement—it will perform well just a foot-and-a-half from the room boundary behind it. Scaling of musical forces, layered depth, and timbral accuracy are excellent. (328)

Dynaudio Confidence 50

$33,500

A 2023 Golden Ear choice for AQ, the Confidence 50s are objectively large loudspeakers—59½" tall and 109 pounds apiece—yet they won't overwhelm a moderate-sized room, either visually or acoustically. The sonic result is likely due to the DCC (Dynaudio Directivity Control) lens, a one-piece aluminum waveguide that serves the speaker's five front-firing drivers, reducing floor and ceiling bounce significantly. That transducer array includes the latest version of the Esotar soft dome tweeter, and two each of the manufacturer's 6" midrange drivers and 7" woofers, which employ Dynaudio's proprietary diaphragm material, Magnesium Silicate Polymer (MSP). Dynamics, big and small, are convincingly scaled: You won't cringe in anticipation of loud musical passages or find yourself leaning in for softer material. Top-drawer amplification—plenty of it—will have the Confidence 50s sounding their considerable best. (338)

Stenheim Alumine Three

$33,950

The Alumine Three is Stenheim's most advanced "compact" floorstanding loudspeaker, intended to deliver the quality and character of the larger Alumine Five in a smaller and more affordable package, The newest Three is a four-driver 3½-way design, where the bottom woofer is taken lower in frequency, and the upper 8" higher. (They share what's in the middle of the bass passband.) A compact, exceptionally built, and easy-to-drive loudspeaker that fits into

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real rooms, with the heart of a large horn system and touches of electrostatic transparency thrown in for good measure, the Alumine Three stands at or near the top of the finest compact loudspeakers available today. Put it on your short list. (304)

Acora Acoustics SRC-1

$35,000

Acora Acoustics speaker enclosures are fabricated from African black granite, a homogenous and mechanically inert material. Owner and designer Valerio Cora is a lifelong audiophile and music lover whose family business for a half century has been "dimension stone"—natural rock utilized for numerous structural and decorative purposes, though not in high-end loudspeakers until Cora found the necessary CNC machinery to produce the precisely hewn granite pieces needed to build the three models that comprise the current Acora line. The SRC-1 is a two-way floorstander with a 1" soft dome tweeter and a 7" sandwich paper-cone woofer, both drivers sourced from ScanSpeak and modified by Cora. The speakers are heavy (246 pounds each), yet elegant tapered monoliths standing 44½" tall. Treble is relaxed, open, and airy; bass manifests good "slam" with plenty of extension to provide a satisfying foundation for symphonic music. (308)

Audiovector R6 Arreté

$35,100

The Audiovector R6 Arreté utilizes the advanced technology created for the R8 and Flagship R11 Arretés in a "more affordable" package designed for smaller rooms. A six-driver design, the R6 included an AMT tweeter, rear-firing 3" midrange, two 6.5" front-firing carbon-fiber midrange drivers, and an isobaric-loaded woofer cabinet implementing a 6.5" and 8" woofer. The sonic character of the R6 Arreté can be generally described as unconstrained and accurate, with an emphasis on resolution and natural detail. It's not that there is more there; it's just that the definition of what's is there is cleaner, crisper, and more resolved. Add to that an almost magically neutral midrange of miraculous speed, and you begin to get the idea. Low frequencies are fast paced and articulate to match the speed and accuracy up top. If you favor detail, dimensionality, clarity, and scale, then these speakers need to be on your list. (313)

Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4

$38,000

Now in its fourth iteration, Bowers & Wilkins's flagship model 801 has been coveted by both recording studios and demanding audiophiles for more than four decades. Over that time frame, there's been considerable evolution of the product, both in technology and appearance, which has morphed from utilitarian boxiness to sleek, sculptural elegance. The "D" refers to the diamond material used to form the dome tweeter's diaphragm, a methodology responsible for an exceptionally high first-breakup frequency of over 70kHz. The mechanically isolated midrange driver has a new suspension system; a pair of 10" Aerofoil woofers provides a potent, well-controlled bass foundation for any musical genre that requires it. Robust amplification helps to realize the full measure of majesty these speakers can muster with the right source material. Newer Signature version ($50,000) adds upgraded drivers, cabinet construction, and crossover components. (324)

Rockport Technologies Atria II

$38,000

The Atria—a true Rockport at a more accessible price and size—embodies the best in modern speaker design. Its vanishingly low distortion leads to uncanny levels of purity and resolution, while also making the speaker easy to listen to. The Atria is also highly coherent, speaking with one voice—a voice that disappears as a source and is capable of throwing a soundstage so deep it's spooky. Surprisingly in this size and price range, this speaker has plenty of bass heft—and dynamic range to spare. All these elements come together effortlessly, creating an experience that will hold you in its spell. The Atria is that rare component that is effortlessly "right" in its musical presentation. Further, the speaker emits a contagious vibe of simply being happy to make music. A terrific speaker and a great value, too. (Atria II review forthcoming)

Magnepan MG 30.7

$39,995

A three-way, two-panel-per-side planar with a ribbon tweeter and quasi-ribbon midrange in one section and a huge quasi-ribbon woofer in the other, the 30.7 is the fastest, most neutral, highest resolution Maggie JV has auditioned—phenomenally lifelike from the upper bass to the lower treble. As marvelous as it is, its tweeter may still need a little "damping down" via a resistor, depending on your electronics, your room, your sitting position, and your hearing. On acoustic music, its bass is quite natural; on electronic music, it gives up some power-range weight and slam to select dynamic speakers (as all dipoles do). Then again, rock 'n' roll has never been the forte of any Magneplanar; however, if you're an absolute sound listener, you're not going to find a more realistic transducer for this kind of money—or any kind of money. (279)

Raidho TD2.2

$44,000 Black; $48,000 Walnut Burl

To say the TD2.2 adds a reasonable measure of bass weight and extension to the overall sound of its smaller sibling, the fabulously high-performing TD1.2 mini-monitor, with just one additional 6.5" mid/woofer and a larger cabinet would be an understatement. The rear-ported, 2.5-way TD2.2 sounds much grander in scale and impact

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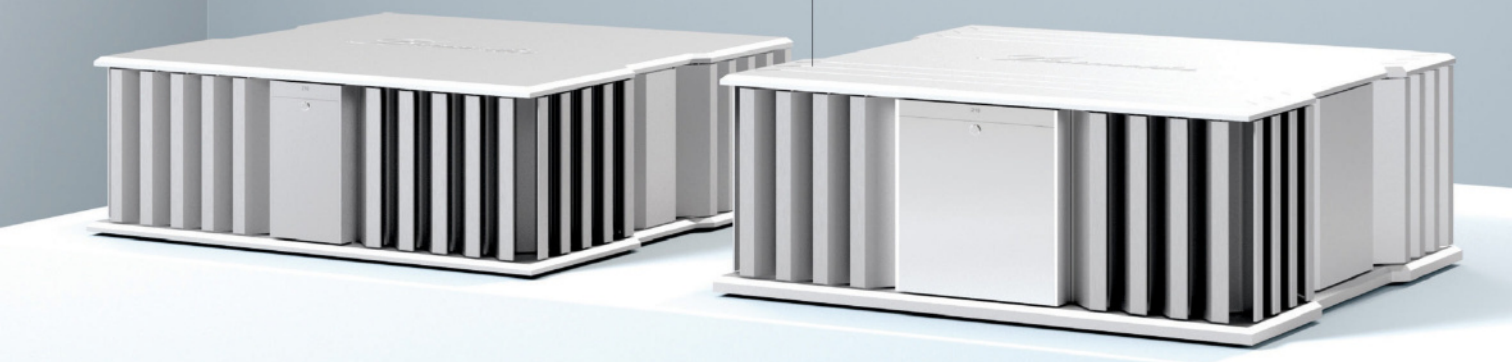

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than its seemingly modest differences would lead one to expect. The TD2.2 delivers fatigue-free high resolution in the top end and midrange coupled with satisfying fullness in the low end. Add in expansive soundstaging and focused imaging in a medium-sized speaker that strikes an elegant, understated pose, and you have a very easy-to-like transducer. Raidho uses its own in-house drivers—one TD ribbon tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woofers layered with five thin coats of tantalum and industrial diamond on an aluminum cone. Music sparkles through the TD2.2. It invites you to listen closely. (331)

Vandersteen Kento Carbon

$44,500

The Kento Carbon is a four-way, five-driver floorstander (1" carbon tweeter, 4.5" Perfect Piston midrange, 6.5" tri-woven mid/woofer, and two 9" powered woofers) in an inert, minimum-baffle, constrained-layer cabinet-within-a-cabinet enclosure. A key advancement is the side-firing 9" woofers that, when used with the 11-band analog low-frequency room-optimization/compensation controls, allows for increased 20Hz-to-200Hz integration adjustments near walls or out into the room.The sound of the Kento Carbon is, first and foremost, extraordinarily cohesive and completely of-a-piece—it takes little effort to be convinced you are listening to realistically reproduced sound. Music through the Kento Carbon manifests itself in three-dimensional form; even though you can't physically see the performance, your ears will tell you what is happening directly in front of you. (312)

Joseph Audio Pearl Graphene

$44,999

The Pearl Graphene comprises two modular sections. The lower half contains twin 8" woofers, and the upper module contains a 7" graphene-coated midrange and 1" Sonatex tweeter. When combined, the two sections form the complete speaker. The Pearl Graphene further improves upon the sound of Joseph Audio's excellent smaller Perspective2 Graphene, especially in the bass with additional power and extension. New FEA advancements in the graphene midrange and subsequent crossover adjustments have yielded a transducer with solid imaging, great soundstaging, excellent clarity, and a stress-free yet detailed presentation. Audition the Pearl Graphene (and reviewer AJ recommends you do) with your favorite music on vinyl, disc, or stream, and prepare to have some fun. (309)

Magico S3 2023

$45,500 M-Cast; $52,500 M-Coat

The S3 2023 is Magico's first design to incorporate technologies developed for its flagship M9. The drivers, for example, are the fruits of three years of research. The 5" midrange cone "features an advanced material formed of a honeycomb aluminum core sandwiched with outer and inner layers of graphene and carbon fiber." The newly developed 9" woofer benefits from Finite Element Analysis (FEA). The cone is an enhanced version of Magico's Graphene Nano-Tec. It doesn't take long to hear what the S3 delivers. One immediately senses its purity, remarkable lack of smearing or noise, top-to-bottom coherence, and completeness of presentation. With your eyes closed, there is no audible evidence that the music is emanating from two relatively large enclosures; rather, it is simply *there*. Moreover, there's an exceptional ease to the sound, a kind of poetic delicacy combined with a power rarely heard from any speaker. (Forthcoming)

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Estelon XB Mk II

$49,000

The Estelon XB Mk II is all about style—both the aesthetic and musical varieties. The speaker, like all Estelons, has one of the most sensuous silhouettes on the market. But the XB Mk II also features resolution so extraordinary, timbres so richly fleshed out, and imaging so stellar that it can take the listener beyond engagement with the music to engagement with the hearts, minds, and style of the players behind the music. Note, though, that the speaker will only do this under the right circumstances. Being of modest sensitivity, the XB requires substantial power. Also, if toed-in even a little, the Accuton ceramic tweeter can prove harsh. With these caveats duly noted, Alan Taffel sums up the Estelon XB Mk II as a rare component that forges a rare listener connection. (255)

T+A Solitaire S 540

$54,900

This three-way speaker features four 8.6" side-firing woofers per speaker in an opposed array, seven 3.5" x 2.4" oval midrange drivers in a line-source array, and the star of the show, an in-house developed 33" planar-magnetic tweeter. The S 540, by design, has a very narrow horizontal and vertical dispersion, resulting in more direct sound at the listening position and less interfering reflected energy. Listening to the S 540, it's immediately apparent that this is a planar design, with that unmistakable immediacy, resolution, coherence, and presence that comes to easily to planar-magnetic drivers. But the S 540 doesn't sound like a dynamic-driver speaker with a planar tweeter, but rather like a full-range planar by virtue of the line-array of tiny midrange drivers that create a seamless tapestry. The S 540's midrange and treble resolution is simply phenomenal. The planar-magnetic tweeter, crossed over at a very low 1.8kHz, is a superb transducer. The narrow dispersion results in extremely precise localization of images. The bass is well balanced, resulting in an extremely engaging and satisfying listening experience. (Forthcoming)

Voxativ 9.87

$59,900

The horn-loaded Voxativ 9.87 has certain advantages that neither planar nor dynamic speakers offer. First, it is very high in sensitivity at close to 100dB/1W/1m, which allows you to drive it to thunderous levels with an SET or lower-powered tube amp. Second, it is a single-driver speaker, using one Voxativ 8" wooden-cone AC-4D widebander with Voxativ's top-line neodymium motor to cover its entire audible range. This means there is no need for a crossover because there are no separate woofers, midranges, and tweeters to join together. Third, the AC-4D is augmented in the bass by an independent, fully adjustable, amplified dipolar subwoofer, the Pi-Bass; as a result, the 9.87 doesn't thin down and roll off in the power range and low end the way other single-driver loudspeakers do. Indeed, the 9.87 doesn't sound like any single-driver speaker JV has heard. It has the body, power, and extension that are almost always missing in such designs and is uncannily even in response from top to bottom. (289)

Vimberg Tonda D

$63,000

Designed and built by the same folks who make ultra-high-end Tidal Audio loudspeakers, the Vimberg line is intended to offer Tidal quality at a lower price. The three-way, five-driver, ported, floorstanding Tonda D is Vimberg's flagship. With a gracefully angled HDF-laminate chassis and a substantial aluminum faceplate, the Tonda D is quite handsome looking. Parts quality is first rate (all Accuton Cell drivers, including a pure diamond tweeter, as well as Mundorf and Dueland electrical parts in Vimberg's "monopulse" crossover). Happily, the sound quality is just as outstanding. Reviewer Andre Jennings found the Tonda Ds had notably excellent imaging, resolution, transient behavior, dynamic contrasts, and undiminished energy (even higher in the frequency range). For listeners who crave full-range transparency to sources, the Tonda D is a must-audition. (320)

YG Acoustics Hailey 3.2

$63,400

The Hailey 2.2 gets so much right and offers so much trickled-down technology that one could make a compelling argument it represents the performance/price sweet spot in the YG line. It actually comes pretty darn close in overall performance to the next-model-up Sonja 2.2 in bass extension, dynamic range, and soundstaging. The Hailey is also the lowest-priced model to include YG's patented hybrid tweeter with a soft-dome membrane supported by a lightweight, acoustically transparent aluminum "air frame." The Hailey 2.2 is a musically expressive, revealing speaker capable of deep-reaching, tuneful bass and agile, wide-ranging dynamics. It creates focused images within an expansive soundstage into which the speakers sonically disappear as sound sources. The more expensive Sonja 2.2 performs better in top-to-bottom coherency, but the Hailey really delivers the sonic goods in its own right—especially in its price category. New Reference 3 version not yet reviewed. (309)

Tidal Piano G3

$64,000

We suspect that the majority of audiophiles will appreciate the exceptional sound qualities of the décor-friendly, ingeniously designed, three-driver (two 7" mid/woofers and one 1.2" diamond tweeter) Piano G3s. Uniquely, they can be used as 2-way monitors (with one of the woofers disabled) or 2.5-ways (with both woofers active in different bands), depending on

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room size and musical content. They do have two limitations that are part of their design. They do not provide the deepest bass or play the loudest and most dynamic passages of popular or classical music with the least coloration, but these limitations are relatively minor. In the main, their level of detail and naturalness of timbre clearly distinguish between different instruments, and their imaging is as natural as the recording allows. (337)

Wilson Audio Alexia V

$67,500

Wilson Audio has updated its mid-line Alexia with material and techniques informed by Wilson's flagship production speaker, the mighty Chronosonic XVX. The result is a speaker that embodies many of the qualities of that reference-grade speaker, but in a smaller and more affordable package. The Alexia V exhibits all the Wilson hallmarks, including a fabulous low end that's powerful and muscular and extends to the bottom octave, yet maintains a sense of precise pitch articulation and dynamic precision. As with the XVX, the Alexia V exhibits the harmonic richness and warmth in the lower midrange that makes that flagship so involving. Brass and woodwind instruments have a full measure of weight and tonal density in their fundamentals and lower-order harmonics without the artificial emphasis on upper harmonics that can impart a metallic sheen to trumpet, saxophone, and the human voice. Yet despite the tonal smoothness, the Alexia V projects a strong sense of presence and of instruments existing between and around the loudspeakers. (342)

Kharma Elegance dB11-1.1-S

$68,000

This reference-quality, three-way, four-driver floorstander uses a beryllium tweeter that is exemplary in its sonic purity and control, and a 7" carbon-composite midrange driver that employs Kharma's sandwich-cone technology, designed to push break-up frequencies as far up as possible, thereby eliminating colorations in the drivers' working range. This lightweight yet rigid midrange driver reportedly employs the highest-strength, least-resonant carbon fiber available today. Two 10" aluminum woofers complete the package, housed, together with the other drivers, in a handsome yet inert cabinet, utilizing Kharma's "Bullet-Proof Laminate" to help reduce resonance and associated colorations. This is an extraordinary speaker with wonderful coherence, terrific low-level detail, gorgeous timbre, smooth yet extended highs, and surprisingly explosive bass. (256)

Magico S7

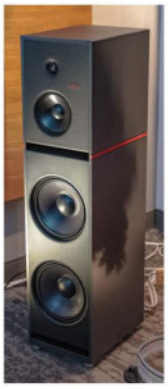
$69,200, M-Cast ($76,300, M-Coat)

An extraordinarily revealing speaker that has very neutral timbre and does not exaggerate or fail to reproduce any aspect of sound quality. Deeply extended in the bass but very uncolored, it can seem slightly weak until you realize how far down the bass goes and how clean and tight it is. Dynamics are truly excellent, although the S7 does need real power to show how good it can be at the most demanding dynamic peaks. The only drawbacks are that this level of quality is anything but cheap, and the S7 offers accuracy, not romance or euphonic coloration. Here, however, its lack of any trace of hardness in the upper octaves makes its accuracy as musical as the recording, the rest of the system, and listening room allow. A great speaker. (266)

Stenheim Alumine 5SE

$73,500

On the outside, the 220-pound, rectangular, aluminum enclosed, four-driver, three-way, fabric-cone Alumine Five SE floorstander looks like a chunky little schoolgirl, but, as JV said in his review, what it actually is is a chunky little stick of dynamite. With a near-hornlike sensitivity of 94dB/1W/1m and a stable 8-ohm impedance, it is capable of simply phenomenal dynamics. When coupled with what may be the most extended, naturally colored, well-defined-in-pitch bass he's heard from a ported loudspeaker (only the Estelon X Diamond Mk II contends), it's explosively "alive"-sounding. From the low end (down to the mid-30Hz range) through the mid-treble, it is capable of dynamic swings that go from 0-to-60 in the blink of an eye. It is also simply gorgeous in tonality, minutely detailed, and unusually three-dimensional in imaging. As was the case with the X Diamond Mk II, it is a standard-setter, only it doesn't require quite as much square footage behind and around it as the Estelon does to perform its magic tricks. (328)



Estelon X Diamond Mk II

$89,000

It's been a decade since JV reviewed the original version of this superb three-way ported loudspeaker from Alfred Vassilkov of Estonia. Since then, Alfred has made enough major improvements—a new Accuton diamond tweeter, a new crossover network with superior parts, new internal wiring—to brand his latest X Diamond a Mk II version. Though some things have remained the same—including the ultra-quiet, aerodynamic, cast-stone enclosure—Alfred's changes have made for a major sonic step forward in what was already one of the best direct-radiating cone loudspeakers Mr. V has reviewed. Always supreme-

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ly detailed and "of a piece" from top to bottom, with the least boomy, most linear, and most extended bottom octaves JV has heard from a woofer in a ported enclosure (the Stenheim Alumine 5SE excepted), the X Diamond Mk II's new tweeter, crossover, and wiring have erased the original's very slight touch of the "analytical," turning what was once primarily a "fidelity to source" speaker into an ideal all-arounder whose richer, more natural tone color, still-outstanding resolution, lifelike dynamic speed and oomph, and remarkable absence of enclosure and driver noise should please every kind of listener. (323)

Wilson Benesch Resolution

$89,000

Reviewer Alan Taffel is not sure whether it's the carbon-fiber enclosure or the rarely seen isobaric woofer arrangement, but something is responsible for making the Wilson-Benesch Resolution one phenomenal loudspeaker. It achieves with technology and dexterity the same benefits that many others accomplish with brute force. Specifically, the Resolution's background is deathly quiet, distortion is inaudible, coloration is negligible, and imaging is uncannily realistic. These are the sonic hallmarks of a vibration-free enclosure. Further, thanks to in-house made, carefully matched drivers and equally well-thought-out crossovers, the Resolution does everything else well, too. Indeed, its strongest suit is bass performance. With its aesthetic appeal, unerring sonics in every parameter, and unfailing musicality, the Resolution is a speaker you will manifestly enjoy living with. (289)

Vandersteen Model 7 XTRM

$89,300 (Bedrock Granite Base included)

Although we haven't reviewed the XTRM version of the Model 7, we've heard it sound spectacular at many shows ever since its introduction. Based on that experience, and our high regard for the original Model 7 (reviewed in Issue 206), we can confidently recommend the XTRM. This phase-and-time-coherent four-way features Vandersteen's proprietary balsawood and carbon-fiber drivers. A 12" powered push-pull woofer couples to a 7" mid/bass driver, 4.5" midrange, and a 1" dome tweeter. The Model 7 XTRM features an eleven-band fixed-frequency equalizer, accessible via a row of tiny rear-panel trim pots, that operates below 120Hz, allowing the speaker's low-frequency response to be tailored to the room. This loudspeaker competes with any speaker in the world in many ways and exhibits top-to-bottom coherence, gorgeous and glare-free timbral reproduction, exceptional bottom-end extension and definition, and a planar-like freedom from box colorations. (Forthcoming)

MBL 101 E MK II

$91,000

Always the thrill rides of the high-end audio amusement park, with sensational dynamic range, superb transients, high resolution of inner detail, and the most surround-like soundstaging this side of a full-bore home-theater system, the four-way, omnidirectional MBL 101 Es had three weaknesses: Their ported bass, though sensationally exciting, was a bit overblown; their upper midrange could be a bit bright; and their imaging at centerstage could be a little vague. The MK II version of this unique omni loudspeaker ameliorates these problems, without losing the unique Radialstrahler virtues, via a redesigned woofer that offers better control, a new subwoofer cabinet, a new ring design for the bass port, re-tuned front-to-rear dispersion, and new crossover technology. The result is a genuine improvement in a genuine classic. (218, 287)

Legacy Audio Valor

$92,000 with Wavelet II DSP Room Correction System

Legacy's Valor with the new Wavelet II processor brings high technology and advanced digital engineering to the loudspeaker category. This powered DSP speaker is physically large, with a massive driver array including dual 12" subwoofers, dual 12" passive radiators, dual 14" woofers, a 14" mid/woofer, a 1.5" coaxial midrange/tweeter, and dual 4" tweeters. These are powered by integral 1kW, 750W, and 500W amplifiers. You need to supply one additional amplifier for the upper range. The Wavelet II outboard processing contains the DSP circuitry as well as Bohmer Correction, which provides optimized in-room energy/time alignment and ideal acoustic transfer in both the frequency and time domains. The Valor demonstrates the effect of removing the limitations in dynamic range and low-frequency response of conventional speakers. It realizes a new level of dynamic detail and contrasts, regardless of the music. The sound is highly detailed, with natural rendering of timbre and precise placement of images within the acoustic. (323)

Magico M3

$94,000

This three-way, five-driver (one 28mm tweet, one 6" midrange, and three 7" woofers) floorstander from Alon Wolf leverages and improves upon the strengths of the limited-production M Project. Equipped with better versions of Magico's audibly superior-sounding diamond-coated beryllium dome tweeter, graphene-carbon midrange and woofer (with a novel driver-coupling system), and the aluminum-and-carbon-fiber enclosure initiated in the M Project, the M3 is quite possibly

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what Magico claims it is: the company's most sophisticated speaker yet. It is certainly among its best-sounding, as lifelike as any multiway JV has heard and, thanks to the curves of its carbon-fiber sidewalls and rounded-aluminum top plate, as invisible as any cone speaker in JV's experience. The M3 pulls off a disappearing act that sets a new high for Magico—and a soundstage of dimensions that, short of an MBL omni, are also a new high for JV. (282)

Raidho TD3.8

$98,000–$115,000

These recently redesigned three-way, five-driver (one ribbon tweeter, two 5" tantalum-diamond midrange, and two 8" tantalum-diamond ported woofers) floor-standers from celebrated Danish speaker manufacturer Raidho are simply great sounding—well worth a trip to a dealer who can properly demonstrate them. TD3.8's features do a truly exceptional job of reproducing the sound of music. The speakers may look somewhat ordinary from the front, and a bit small to approach reference-quality, but even a few minutes of serious listening to any good recording with high-quality ancillaries will convince you that they have exceptional detail, life, and dynamic energy, a remarkable amount of bass extension and resolution, and an overall frequency balance from the deep bass to the top treble that is unusually accurate and low in coloration. Even if you can never afford speakers at this price level, listening to the TD3.8s will still teach you something worth knowing about buying the speakers you can afford. (309)

YG Acoustics Sonja 3.2

$99,000

The Sonja 2.2*i* improves upon the award-winning 1.2 with even greater dynamic ease, bass weight, soundstage continuousness, and resolution of fine detail. The main technical improvement comes from a kind of hybrid tweeter (patented) called BilletDome that combines a soft-dome membrane with a very lightweight, strong, and acoustically transparent supporting "air frame." The result is a remarkably articulate tweeter capable of withstanding G-forces similar to those of good metal domes but without their oft-associated tell-tale metallic ringing. The cabinet and crossover have also been updated for greater accuracy and efficiency in the bass. The 2.2*i*'s inter-driver coherency and transparency to sources are exemplary. It recreates a very large, focused soundscape, and its overall presentation allows a great deal of musical expressiveness to come through—to thrilling effect on good recordings. (279, 327, new Reference 3 version not yet reviewed)

Avantgarde Acoustic Trio G3

$109,000–$175,000 (with one pair Space Horns)

Avantgarde has revised its statement loudspeaker, celebrating its 30th anniversary with the Trio G3. There's a lot to celebrate. This massive Teutonic loudspeaker system, when outfitted with the full six-pack of subwoofers, each sporting two 12" horn-loaded woofers, can reach death-defying sound pressure levels. The level of midbass solidity, a region where many loudspeakers falter, could hardly be more impressive. But crushing dynamics are not simply what this loudspeaker is about. On the contrary: it displays a remarkable fidelity at lower volumes, thanks to the alacrity of its drivers. The clarity and finesse of the G3 are instantly audible, a tribute to the simplicity of its external passive crossover. As it happens, the G3 can also be run in active mode with its internal iTron amplifiers. (The subwoofers are fully active.) Either way, the Trios offer stunning performance for anyone with the space to let them strut their stuff. Their ability to ramp up effortlessly to a full orchestral crescendo offers a more realistic reproduction of the concert hall than most other loudspeakers can even contemplate, let alone execute. (Forthcoming)

Kharma Exquisite EXQ-MD-3.0-S

$115,000

The $115,000 EXQ-MD-3.0-S is, incredibly, the seventh from Kharma's top of the line. The speaker employs a unique method of cabinet fabrication, implementing high pressure laminate (HPL) in a multi-layer construction that is CNC machined and adhered in vertical plates to dampen mechanical vibration to almost zero. This allows incredible control of both the internal cavity shape and the volume of the cabinet and ensures the reduction of diffraction and phase anomalies. The result is a speaker enclosure that is sumptuous, and a sonic signature that connected with reviewer Matthew Clott on a very deep emotional level. Subtlety and refinement, tonal structure, timbre and texture, the music itself were all wonderfully present, within one of the deepest and most natural stages MC has ever heard. (309)

MartinLogan Neolith

$120,000

MartinLogan swung for the fences with the Neolith, mounting a roughly 4' x 2' XStat electrostatic panel atop an enclosure that houses a front-firing 12" driver and a 15" rear-firing woofer. Once you've heard the transparency, resolution, and sheer sense of nothing between you and the music that the Neolith's big panel delivers, you'll be spoiled for life. Surprisingly, these virtues of electrostats are combined with seamless integration with the bass, resulting in a speaker with full frequency extension and dynamics along with fabulous transparency.

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The Neolith is beautifully built and finished (available in seven colors), highly flexible in room-matching, and backed by a solid company with nearly 40 years of experience in building electrostatic loudspeakers. An unqualified triumph that competes in the upper echelon of today's best cost-no-object loudspeakers, the Neolith was *The Absolute Sound*'s 2015 Overall Product of the Year. (259)

Rockport Technologies Orion

$133,000

With all new drivers developed specifically for the Orion, along with a new enclosure design, the Orion is Rockport's definitive statement at the price and size. The enclosure is made from a cast aluminum inner shelf and a carbon-fiber outer shell, with a highly damped viscoelastic core material between them. The speaker projects a sense of clarity, resolution, alacrity, and vibrant immediacy. Yet this description of "vibrant immediacy" could apply to other speakers that don't engage the listener musically the way that Orion does. The difference is that although the Orion has a pristine clarity and very high resolution of detail, it doesn't sound forward, aggressive, or analytical. Rather, the Orion sounds utterly liquid and warm in timbre, with no hint of etch or metallic hardness. But what really distinguishes the Orion is the transient fidelity, not just in the way notes start and stop in the usual sense, but that this speed and snap was uniform over the entire bandwidth. A bonus is the Orion's relatively small size, allowing it to fit into many rooms where a larger speaker would be overpowering. A musical and technical triumph. (338)

Wilson Audio Alexx V

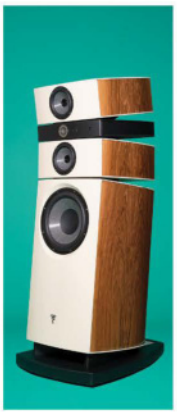
$145,000

The slightly smaller brother to Wilson's mighty Chronosonic XVX, the Alexx V delivers huge on looks and performance, and is a massive improvement over the previous Alexx. This five-driver tower utilizes Wilson's proprietary V Material, along with other new technologies Wilson's developed for the XVX. Although physically massive, its beautiful sweeping lines and open design give it the appearance of being considerably smaller than it is. The Alexx V delves deep into the soul of music. Its finesse, staging, and scale offer not just a sense of realism, but reality itself. The music flows in layers of textural complexity and grace with a sense of ease and effortlessness akin to waves upon an ocean shore—such power yet such serenity. Certainly, one of the most spatially coherent, tonally accurate, emotionally inspiring speakers that reviewer MC has heard. (327)

Focal Stella Utopia EM Evo

$149,998

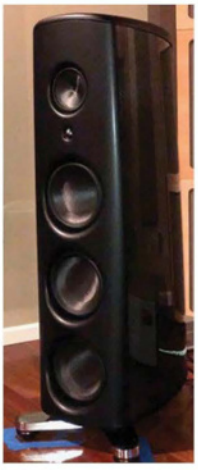
Focal calls its second-from-the-top Stella Utopia EM Evo a technological twin sister to its pinnacle Grande Utopia EM Evo. Indeed, the Stella shares the Grande's high-efficiency field coil or electro-magnetic (EM) woofer concept, TMD (Tuned Mass Damper) driver suspension, NIC (Neutral Inductance Circuit), MRR (Machined Reinforced Rings), "W"-sandwich composite cone material, Power Flower magnet structure, Focus Time driver alignment, and multi-adjustment sound personalization, integrated into a 3-way design with more svelte dimensions than the larger 4-way. Once properly set up and adjusted, the Stella Utopia EM Evo offers an uncanny amount of transparency, reminiscent of electrostatic loudspeakers. But unlike many 'stats, the Stella has frequency extremes to balance the sound. The ability to keep up with the lightning-fast rhythm and pacing of music while maintaining bass performance that is tight, controlled, and realistic sounding is a highlight of the speaker's performance. The speaker also boasts near-unlimited dynamic playback capability (with the right amplification) and great instrumental separation. With its unusual adjustability and tunable performance, the Stella Utopia EM Evo is a world-class performer. (338)



Magico M6

$185,000

Starting with the M Pro, Magico has gone from massive, squared-off metal enclosures to tapered carbon-fiber and smoothly curved milled-aluminum ones. The parallel sidewalls and sharp diffractive edges of Alon Wolf's earlier floorstanding models have been eliminated, and you can hear the difference in the way the M speakers disappear as sound sources a little more than a year ago, Magico introduced the first descendant of the M Pro, the M3. This year it has introduced a larger version of the same basic design, the M6, with an even more aerodynamic shape (a nearly elliptical chassis) and bigger woofers with considerably greater oomph in the bass and power range. The result was the fullest-range, least cones-in-a-box-sounding cone speaker reviewer JV had heard to that point in time. Of course, the M6 weighs a ton, requires the best amplification and source components possible, and costs a bundle. But if you have a strong back and an even stronger bank account, it (or the smaller, less pricey, sonically similar M3) is a must-audition. (302)



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Rockport Lyra

$190,000

The Lyra sets a new standard in innovative cabinet construction as well as in sound quality. The Lyra is a three-and-a-half-way, five-driver design with a rear-firing port. Two 6" midrange drivers flank the 1" waveguide-loaded tweeter, with two 10" drivers on the bottom. The enclosure is made from two massive shells of cast aluminum, with the cavity between them filled with a proprietary, high-density urethane core material. Musically, the Lyra delivers a horn-like visceral immediacy with its absolutely stunning dynamic performance. The musical effect cannot be overstated; the Lyra sounds "alive" in a way that other speakers do not. Yet for all its verve and panache, this is a speaker of great delicacy, capable of conveying the subtlest nuance of texture and shading. It's also the most beautiful in timbre that RH has heard, combining high resolution with lush textural liquidity. The icing on the cake is the Lyra's small size (for a world-class reference, which it certainly is) that allows it to fit in many more rooms than other speakers of this price. One of the world's great speakers. (276)

Göbel High End Divin Noblesse

$250,000/$29,500 optional Sovereign subwoofer

The mid-line Divin Noblesse from Germany's Göbel High End presents a massive physical presence with its sheer size and faceted hourglass shape. The three-way design is built around a pair of in-house-designed 12" woofers and 8" midranges flanking a very large Air-Motion Transformer tweeter in the narrow middle section. The multifaceted enclosure is ported to the front by four ports per woofer, symmetrically positioned around each driver. This is a truly full-range speaker with wide bandwidth and seemingly unlimited dynamic range. The Divin Noblesse's most salient characteristic is a lively upper midrange-to-lower treble region that brings detail to the fore. The bass had a nice bit of extra bloom and color, but the speaker could get away with this simply because the bottom end sounds so precise and detailed. (335)

Wilson Benesch Eminence

$255,000

The Eminence is nothing short of a technical *tour de force* in advanced loudspeaker design. With its in-house-made carbon-fiber enclosure, custom drivers, isobaric woofer loading, innovative tweeter, and no-compromise execution, the Eminence can lay claim to being one of the world's most sophisticated loudspeakers. All that cutting-edge technology is in service to a single goal: to make the speaker disappear. And disappear it does, not just spatially but in tonal colorations and dynamic eccentricities as well. The Eminence is as colorless in timbre as you'll find, and its ability to convey music's rhythms, dynamic accents, flow, and energy is spectacular. The sound is decidedly "top down," favoring dynamic agility, speed, and a light-on-its-feet character over the last measure of bass weight and extension. The electrostatic-like midrange transparency and resolution vaults the Eminence into the upper echelon of the world's top loudspeakers. (293)

Wilson Audio Chronosonic XVX

$349,000

Wilson Audio's flagship production speaker is a landmark achievement, setting a new standard of realism in reproduced music, regardless of technology. The massive four-way, seven-driver speaker, housed in five separate enclosures, features new drivers, cabinet materials, crossover components, even binding posts. The XVX shares with Wilson's $850,000 WAMM Master Chronosonic the ability to time-align the driver outputs at the listening positions with astonishing accuracy—within just two microseconds. The XVX has stunning transient performance and dynamic agility, a gorgeously beautiful midrange that combines harmonic warmth with high resolution, a sweet-sounding top end, and world-class soundstaging. The result is a transducer capable of conveying a wealth of musical expression, from the smallest subtleties to the most visceral. A world-class reference that advances the state of the art in loudspeaker design. RH's reference. (308)

Burmester BC350

$375,000

The slim front profile along with the beautiful visual design give the massive, top-of-the-line Burmester BC350 an elegance that eludes most big speakers. Moreover, the BC350 is available in a wide variety of finishes, including matte or gloss colors or a variety of natural woods. The driver complement includes a forward-firing pair of midrange drivers flanking an AMT tweeter, dual side-firing woofers, and an upward-firing tweeter. In "Pure" mode, one of the midrange drivers and the upward-firing tweeter are disabled. The speaker is built on an aluminum frame and can be rotated on its base to more easily achieve optimal toe-in. The BC350 has an utterly natural presentation, with a very smooth and extended treble with no trace of brightness or excessive sibilance. As you'd expect from a massive flagship, the BC350 can deliver the kind of deep bass extension, dynamic contrast, and impact that are the exclusive domain of big speakers. Soundstaging is another of the BC350's strong suits, with tremendous depth and palpable air. (341)

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MBL 101 X-Treme MKII

$398,000

How do you improve on a truly great loudspeaker, especially a *sui generis* one like the six-foot-tall, four-tower MBL 101 X-treme *Radialstrahler* system? Well, you have to add something you didn't realize was missing in the first place. In this case, *very* low bass. In JV's relatively small digs, the 101 X-treme MKIIs' new subwoofer stacks now (measurably and audibly) reproduce 16Hz notes at the same sound pressure level as 1kHz ones—resulting in a low-end extension, clarity, dimensionality, and dynamic impact that JV has never before experienced at home, at a show, or in anyone else's listening room. As he said, ecstatically, when he first heard Jürgen Reis' new subs, "This is unbelievable!" How has Jürgen managed this feat? Through multiple changes to the crossover, drivers, electronics, and enclosures of the sub stacks, and the addition of the ingeniously designed, adjustable analog equalization. You not only get unparalleled bottom-octave extension, resolution, presence, and power; you also get a superior, near-seamless blend of cone subwoofers and *Radialstrahlers* in the mid-to-upper bass and lower midrange, making for what is, far and away, the best low-end reproduction JV has heard from a loudspeaker of any kind. When you add this incredible bass to what is already incredible midrange and treble, you end up with a sound that will raise goosebumps on just about every well-recorded track. (342)

Magico M9

$750,000

Magico's new flagship M9 is a four-way, six-driver dynamic speaker in a sealed enclosure measuring 80" tall. The lower section flares dramatically into a wide oval that is reminiscent of a hoop skirt. The system is shipped in two sections; the lower section houses the dual 15" woofers, 6" midrange, and 1.1" tweeter. The upper section holds two 11" mid/bass drivers and is mated to the lower section when the speaker is installed. Each M9 weighs 1000 pounds, and the pair is priced at $750,000. The M9 is built using a new cabinet construction; it must be actively bi-amped (crossover included); and its design benefits from two new cutting-edge measurement tools. Music reproduced through the M9 had the remarkable quality of appearing from nowhere, completely untethered to the speakers. This characteristic was certainly related to the M9's completely silent background as well as its stunning spatial presentation, with wide staging and continuousness of imaging. The M9 is utterly colorless; describing its specific sonic characteristics in terms of tonal balance or of what it does well and where it could be better seems pointless; the speaker appears to have virtually no sound of its own. The M9's bass extension, power, and weight are, as might be expected from the design, exemplary. But the bottom end also has a clarity, definition, and warmth that extends from the upper bass all the way down to the bottom-most octave. The speaker has a complete and unwavering sense of effortless ease on all music. It can scale the heights of the most demanding music without a hint of congestion or confusion. Despite this ability, the M9 can convey with equal authenticity the intimacy of a solo instrument. A stunning achievement in loudspeaker design. (330)

MOMENTUM MxV INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

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THE MOMENTUM MxV INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER by Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems achieves a level of performance and refinement that was never before possible in an integrated component. Combining the front-end technology of the Momentum HD Preamplifier and the power section of the Momentum MxV Amplifier, it delivers Momentum Series performance in a compact framework whose elegant design only hints at the advanced circuitry within.

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Dan D'Agostino
MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS

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SUBWOOFERS

GoldenEar ForceField 30

$900

The ForceField 30 brings the build and sonic qualities of GoldenEar's own elite SuperSub into the sub-$1k market. Driven by 1000W digital amp, the forward-firing, long-throw 8" driver is enhanced by a downward-firing passive radiator. The ForceField 30 drops into the upper twenty cycle range with conviction with little in the way of overhang artifacts or "slowness." Dynamic impacts exit as cleanly as they enter—a tribute to the effective and controlled tuning of the passive radiator. Beyond the visceral impression of deep bass, the FF30 also helps to complete the ambient sonic landscape. A serious musical achievement, not to mention a flat-out blast. (335)

REL Acoustics T/7x

$1099

A special round of applause is due this mini-sub for music lovers. The new T/7i is even faster and tighter than its forbear, yet remains tonally supple, with well-defined timbres. It's also remarkably potent for a single, forward-firing 8" driver augmented by a quick-reacting, downward-firing 10" passive radiator (and a smooth 200W Class AB amp). The sumptuous high-gloss lacquered enclosure with aluminum accents has inputs for high-level Neutrik Speakon (cable included), plus low-level RCA and LFE. A little classic. (265)

JL Audio Dominion d08/d10

d08, $1100; d10, $1300 (black ash, add $100 for gloss black)

JL's less costly Dominion series shares much of the design technology and all the philosophy of its more upscale models. What differentiates the Dominion from the slightly more expensive E Series? First the E-series has more sophisticated electronics. Second, the Dominion's drivers don't use the dual-spider technique of the E subs, and third, their baskets are not as deep. For a multi-purpose living room system, a combination of two Dominion D110s and JL's CR-1 electronic crossover is just the thing to help your system go from extremely good to arrestingly excellent. (313)

GoldenEar SuperSub X

$1750

Almost impossibly small but packing dual active drivers and twin passive radiators plus 1500W of Class D DSP-controlled power, the little X captures the realism of the concert hall. Bass is full bodied and controlled and exhibits the requisite bloom and resonant sustain expected of a subwoofer in the bottom octaves. Not just for the classical or jazz aficionados, the SuperSub willingly hits the dance floor with all the right moves—rhythmic output, speed, and punch that belie its modest dimension. It will mate superbly with a wide range of compacts and smaller floorstanders and fit into almost any room. Home cinema anyone? You betcha. A subwoofer of estimable shock and slam along with musical subtlety that's also a bargain to boot. (287)

JL Audio e110/e112

$1900/$2500 (black ash, add $200 for gloss black)

Before he got this hefty, little cube (with 10" driver) from JL Audio, JV was anything but a fan of subwoofers, which always seemed to take more away in midrange transparency, tone color, and resolution than they paid back in bass-range extension, detail, and power. Crossed over at the right frequency—which is easy to do with the instructions that JL provides and the e-Sub's manifold built-in controls, including a genuine fourth-order Linkwitz-Riley high-pass/low-pass crossover—the e110 is the very first sub he's heard that doesn't screw up the sound of the main speaker. Rather it seems to extend that sound into the bottom octaves, producing some of the highest resolution of bass timbres and textures he's heard from any transducer. (244)

GoldenEar SuperSub XXL

$2750

Speaker-maker GoldenEar is legendary for extracting big sound from reasonably priced products. The SuperSub XXL is a case in point. The company has crammed an astounding amount of technology into this fairly diminutive subwoofer, including a 1600-watt digital amplifier that is controlled by a 56-bit DSP device with a 192kHz sampling rate. Add two 12" long-throw active drivers and two infrasonic drivers, and you've got a recipe for a powerful, bone-crushing sub. No matter the source material—rock, pop, or classical—the XXL will deliver a deep and tuneful foundation that helps to create an airier and wider soundstage. (264)

REL S/812

$3299

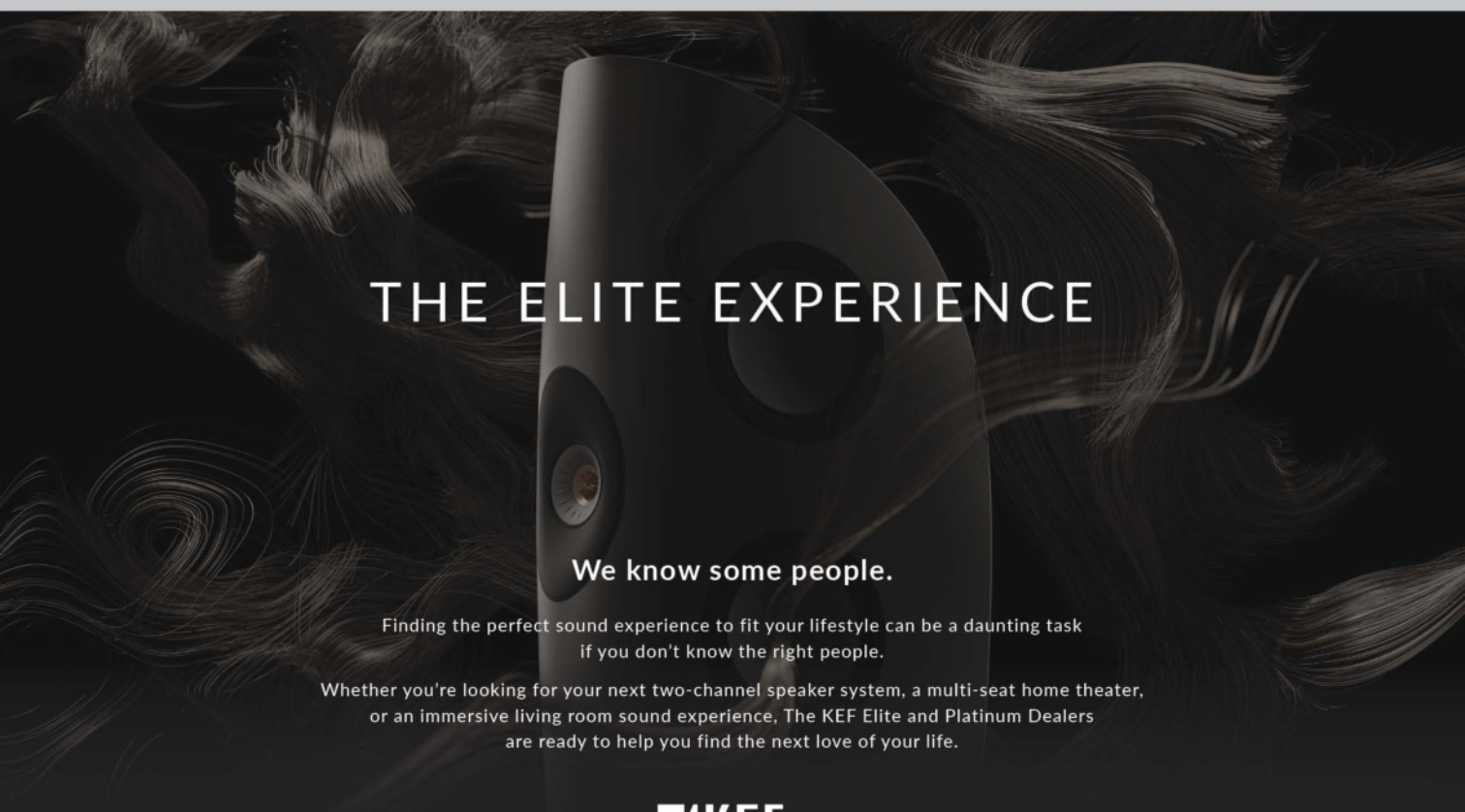
The S/812 hits all the bottom-octave benchmarks we've come to expect from REL's top-drawer subs. Luxuriously finished, the S/812 is equipped for battle, with 800W of Class D power, a twelve-inch forward-firing driver, and a matching downward-firing passive woofer. Frequency extension is rock stable and linear, plummeting like a pile driver into the 20Hz range with nary a resonance, squeak, or rattle. Even at assault-force levels, NG wasn't able to trigger spurious resonances or overhang. Though its emphasis is on speed and control, the S/812 doesn't clamp down on decay cues or attenuate instrumental resonances. It provides a firm foundation beneath the music that fortifies images, perspective, and scale. (308)

M&K X10

$3499

From the folks who cut their teeth designing some of the first top-notch sub/sat systems comes the X10, a 350W, 62-pound box with serious acoustic

KEF Listen and believe



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intentions. It sports dual, push/pull, long-stroke 10" drivers (a total surface area equivalent to a single 15" driver) in a sealed (acoustic-suspension) enclosure. As a THX-certified subwoofer, cinema-level output, room-rattling extension, explosive dynamics, and power handling were never in question. With its bevy of two-channel and LFE cinema settings options, the blend of sub and satellite produced a seamless, dimensional soundfield as good as NG has attained in his listening room. As a sub/sat system paired with M&K's S150 compact monitor, this formidable combination was never at a loss for thrilling musicality. (326)

JL Audio CR-1 Crossover

$3500

Outboard active analog crossovers are scarce on the ground nowadays. Which is why JL Audio's CR-1 subwoofer crossover comes as such a surprise. You've got to hand it to Brett Hanes and his fellow engineers at JL Audio: They are serious about subwoofing, and the CR-1, which took years to perfect, is a serious effort to optimize the interface between your main speakers and your subs. Built around two banks of extremely high-precision Linkwitz-Riley low-pass and high-pass filters, the CR-1 gives you an entire toolbox of controls that allows you to dial-in the hinge frequencies, slopes, output, and damping (Q) of both the mains and the subs. Though JV has never loved outboard crossovers because of the price they so often exact in transparency, resolution, and dynamic range, the CR-1 appears to be an exception. It is highly transparent, and the improvements the CR-1 can make in achieving a truly seamless blend through the crossover region are considerable—and quite audible. Note that the CR-1 lacks a phase adjustment, which isn't a problem when used with JL's subwoofers which have their own integral phase control. (254, 283)

Wilson Audio ActivXO

$4900

The ActivXO subwoofer crossover is an updated version of Wilson's long-standing WATCH Controller. The all-analog ActivXO is a dual-channel unit, meaning that it can control two subwoofers with independent fine-tuning of each. These adjustments include the crossover frequency and slope, as well as continually variable phase for each sub. Balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs are provided. The ActivXO can be operated as a high-pass filter and a low-pass filter in those systems where high-pass filtering the main speakers is desired. Alternately, the unit can low-pass filter the signal driving the subwoofer amplifier while leaving the signal driving the main speakers unfiltered. (308)

JL Audio Fathom f112/f113v2

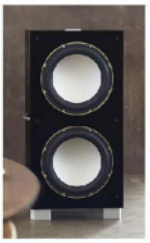
$5000 (f112v2); $6000 (f113v2)

These two subs—identical except for woofer size (12" vs. 13.5") and amplifier power (1800W vs. 3000W)—raise the bar in subwoofer performance with their unlikely combination of brute-force power and tonal and dynamic finesse. Capable of delivering high SPLs at very low frequencies without strain, the Fathoms are adept at resolving the pitches, dynamics, and timbre of an acoustic bass. Loaded with useful adjustments, including low-pass filter, polarity, variable phase, and ELF trim. Built-in DARO room correction, considerably upgraded in the newer V2 models, greatly smooths in-room response and makes for easier integration with your main speakers. Reference-quality performance at a reasonable price. (283)

REL 212/SX

$5000

In a beautifully finished piano-black cabinet, each REL 212/SE houses two front-facing 12" drivers made of continuous cast alloy and capable of an astounding 2" linear excursion. The bass drivers are driven by an onboard Class D amplifier rated at 1000



watts. Each cabinet also contains a back-facing 12" passive radiator and a downward-firing 12" passive radiator, both made of the same alloy material. In use, the name of the game for this subwoofer is speed, speed, speed, with negligible distortion. Because of that speed, reviewer Don Saltzman found it was much easier to mate the 212/SE with full-range loudspeakers. Basically, silent until called upon for action, a pair of 212/SEs will radically increase the perceived sense of air and space of almost any recording. At the same time, definition is precise and output capabilities are immense. New 212/SX (not yet reviewed) brings upgraded technology and performance. (212/SE reviewed in Issue 285)

JL Audio Fathom IWS In-Wall

$6050/$9650

Leave it to JL Audio to reinvent the in-wall subwoofer. Forget the stereotypes of in-wall subs— bloated mid-bass, no real low bass, and as much sound coming from wall vibration as there is from the subwoofer. The IWS system eliminates these problems by isolating the woofer enclosure from the wall structure with an innovative suspension system. Second, JL has shoehorned many of its patented technologies into a shallow version of the fabulous 13.5" driver first developed for the company's Fathom f113. Third, the woofer is powered by a hefty outboard amplifier with integral crossover and JL Audio's superb DARO 18-band DSP room correction. Five enclosure sizes are available depending on the stud depth and number of woofers in the enclosure, along with two amplifier configurations, with each tailored to a specific enclosure volume. All this attention to detail pays off; the IWS delivers deep, clean, well-defined bass with zero audible wall vibration or rattling. A great product that fills a much-needed niche. (300)

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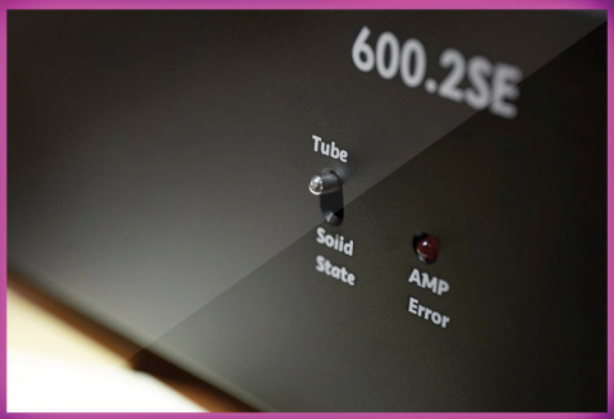

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Wilson Audio LōKē

$8950

Wilson head honcho Daryl Wilson has hit a home run with the LōKē, a subwoofer that plays the low keys with thunderous conviction. Wilson has coupled a 500-watt Class A amplifier to a 10" driver housed in an extremely inert cabinet. It includes a high-pass, low-pass, and subsonic filter with the controls mounted on the rear of the sub. The flexibility of the sub's crossover frequency and output controls make it a dream to set up, and the LōKē should easily blend with a variety of loudspeakers. The benefits it provides are immediately audible—a bigger perceived soundstage and a more satisfying bass foundation. Its excellent pitch definition helps to ensure that the bass frequencies it produces are not bloated, but precise and tuneful. This diminutive subwoofer is a heavyweight when it comes to delivering the musical goods. (330)

JL Audio Gotham g213v2

$20,000

This gigantic $20k subwoofer with two 13.5" drivers has simply redefined subwoofing for JV. Never a fan of subs, he's been turned around by this wonderful product, which in combination with JL's CR-1 crossover, is capable of a more seamless blend with main speakers (be they two-ways, panels, or multiways) than anything he's yet heard (in fact, than anything he imagined possible), with next-to-none of the midrange veiling—the loss of resolution and transparency—that was inevitably part-and-parcel of subwoofing in the not-too-distant past. What the Gotham does is open up an entire new world of loudspeaker possibilities, wherein smaller and/or less expensive mains can be made to sound a whole lot like Wilson Alexandrias or Magico M6s for a lot less dough. (254)

Wilson Audio SubSonic

$38,900

Most subwoofers today pack a large driver into a small enclosure, and then massively equalize the drive signal to compensate for the lack of cabinet volume. The Wilson SubSonic is not one

You are
NOT
hearing
all the music!

of these. Rather, the SubSonic's enclosure is as big as it needs to be for the woofers to operate correctly without resorting to equalization. About as tall and half as wide as a refrigerator, and weighing 610 pounds, the SubSonic requires a serious commitment of money, space, and an outboard amplifier to drive it. The three 12" long-excursion woofers in the ported enclosure deliver bass response that is flat to an astonishing 10Hz (–2dB). Make no mistake; the SubSonic will reproduce music's lower octave with majestic power and grace. Requires an outboard amplifier and crossover, such as Wilson's ActivXO. (308)

EXPERT ADVICE
POWER AMPLIFIERS

General Guidelines

- Decide on a separate preamplifier and power amplifier or integrated amplifier. An integrated amplifier incorporates, in one chassis, a preamplifier and power amplifier.
- Integrated amplifiers are more cost-effective, simpler to install and use, and take up less space than separate components.
- A separate preamplifier and power amplifier often deliver superior performance and more power than an integrated amplifier. In addition, separates allow you to upgrade just the power amplifier, for example.
- Match the amplifier to the loudspeaker and room size. A speaker of low sensitivity, as well as a large room, requires a more powerful amplifier to achieve an adequate volume. (See Expert Advice: Loudspeakers in this issue for details.)
- Loudspeakers of low sensitivity, or of low impedance, or with an impedance dip requires a much more robust and power amplifier than a high-sensitivity speaker or one with a higher impedance. Specifically, these speakers require an amplifier with the ability to increase its current output into low impedances.
- Amplifiers with the ability to deliver current into low-impedance speakers are generally large and heavy. They are characterized by an ability to double (or nearly double) their power rating with every halving of impedance. For example, an amplifier rated at 100W into 8 ohms may output only 140W into 4 ohms, while another amplifier, also rated at 100W into 8 ohms, may output 200W into 4 ohms. The latter is a much better choice for low-impedance, current-hungry speakers.

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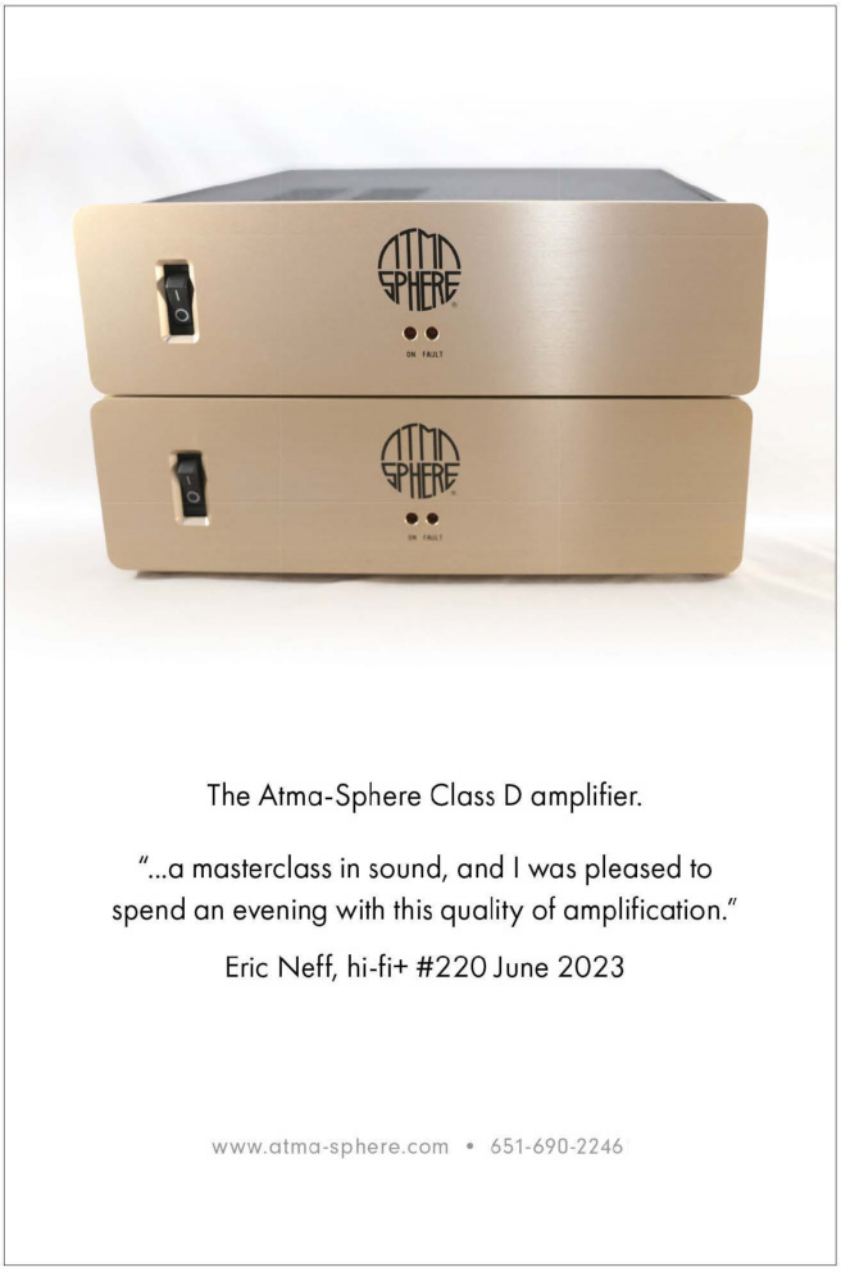
Power Amplifiers

- Choose between a stereo power amplifier (two amplifier channels in one chassis) and a pair of monoblock amplifiers (one amplifier channel in each chassis). Stereo amplifiers are more cost effective, but monoblocks are often preferred for the most ambitious systems.
- Traditional amplifiers have operated in Class A/B, meaning that the amplifier's output transistors or tubes amplify an analog waveform.
- An alternative to Class A/B is the Class D amplifier, also known as a switching amplifier. Class D amps can provide very high power output in a small, lightweight, and cool-running chassis. Their output transistors turn on and off very quickly (thus the name "switching" amplifier), with the audio signal's amplitude encoded in the resulting pulses.
- Tube amplifiers employ vacuum tubes rather than transistors. Many listeners prefer the tube amplifier's richer and warmer sound, even though the tube amplifier's bass is often less deep and powerful than that of a transistor amp.
- Hybrid amplifiers combine tubes and transistors in one amplifier.



POWER AMPLIFIERS

Schiit Audio Aegir

$799

Within its power limit of 20 watts per channel, the Aegir stereo basic amplifier (no volume controls, no Class D, pure analog circuitry) offers truly superb performance, both technically and musically. With speakers of suitable (higher) sensitivity, it gives the sonic purity, tonal beauty, and intrinsic clarity that admirers of SET amplification are always talking about, but the Aegir's solid-state circuitry has none of the peculiarities of SETs. A pair of Aegirs operated in bridged mode will expand the possibilities for suitable speakers. (335)

Odyssey Khartago Stereo/Mono

$995/$1975/pr.

Although the 130Wpc Odyssey Khartago solid-state stereo amp has been around for better than a decade, it was new to JV until amp-connoisseur Alon Wolf (of Magico) told him he used it in his shop, and it was excellent. Wolf was right. Although the Khartago doesn't have all the articulation and transparency of the standard-setting Soulution 711 stereo amplifier, it has a surprisingly similar balance, no discernible grain, high resolution, and a deep, wide soundstage. Positively, the best budget amp

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JV has heard, not counting the Odyssey Khartago monoblocks, which have the same power rating as the Khartago but a stiffer power supply and wider bandwidth, giving them the same basic sound as the two-channel unit with slightly more resolution, dynamic oomph, top-end air, and channel separation. (194, 246)

Audio by Van Alstine Vision SET 120

$1199

The solid-state Audio by Van Alstine Vision SET 120 is rated at 60Wpc into 8 ohms and "much more" into 4 ohms. AVA doesn't publish full specs, although the website states that they are available on request. (In keeping with the AVA spirit reviewer DK chose not to request them.) In any event, those 60 watts were plenty for driving DK's Monitor Audio Studios to a more than room-filling blast, never losing control despite the raging instrumentation swirling around the driving backbeat of Spiritualized's challenging *And Nothing Hurt* album. Like its companion AVA Transcendence RB 10 preamp, the Vision SET 120 is the best bargain DK has reviewed. An easy recommendation. (290)

LSA Warp 1

$1499

The heart of the LSA Warp 1 power amplifier is a Texas Instruments TPA3255 "PurePath" Class D circuit. For the input buffer and preamplifier sections, a Texas Instruments OPA1642/1656 op-amp and OPA 1637 balanced drivers were employed, along with a "bootstrapped" input buffer. Combined with its 600W switching-mode power supply, the result is an extremely quiet power amplifier with a signal-to-noise ratio that achieves numbers consistent with the performance of the finest DACs. The Warp 1 is the best sounding Class D power amp SS has reviewed. (331)

Orchard Audio Starkrimson Mono

$1600/pr.

While virtually all Class D amplifiers use off-the-shelf output modules, the diminutive Starkrimson is built from a proprietary circuit topology of Orchard Audio's own design. With 150W into 8 ohms on tap, the Starkrimson yielded a remarkably transparent soundstage and a spacious presentation. The musical tapestry was vibrant with transients unleashed to their full dynamic potential. What was also endearing was its ability to scale dynamic peaks without changing its tonal character. This was coupled with stunning resolution of complex passages, which left reviewer Dick Olsher thinking that this should not be happening with a $1500-per-stereo-pair amplifier. The Starkrimson sounds like a high-definition Class A amplifier, and surely offers a glimpse into the future of Class D amplification. (323)

NuPrime AMG STA

$1750

The NuPrime AMG STA is a sleek, compact Class D power amplifier with a Class A preamp stage and a linear power supply. The box is simple, with only a metal switch on the front, a small white LED indicator, and the NuPrime logo. It outputs a solid 130Wpc into 8 ohms in stereo mode and 300Wpc into 8 ohms in mono mode. The AMG STA sounds easy and relaxed with a decently solid low end and a crisp, pleasant midrange. It has enough power to run difficult-to-drive speakers in either stereo or mono mode, and a warm finesse that pairs well with most setups, especially with the NuPrime AMG PRA preamp. (319)

Coincident Speaker Technology Dynamo 34SE MKIII

$1799

The swanky Dynamo isn't your typical 8Wpc single-ended triode (SET) design. There is no 300B in sight. A 6SL7 dual-triode drives a triode-connected EL34 output stage. There is no global feedback, and the power supply is tube rectified. Expect a sweet midrange, an exceptionally dimensional soundstage, and a dynamic presentation belying the amp's miniscule power rating—at least when driving a high-sensitivity loudspeaker. Harmonic textures aren't overly liquid, implying decent-bandwidth output transformers. Treble textures can be improved via judicious tube-rolling. Here is an amp that shouldn't be defined on the basis of its cost. It captures much of the magic of SETs at an entry-level price for that technology. (250, 283)

PS Audio S300

$1999

If you can't get excited over an amp like the S300, you might reconsider your own high-end bona fides. Based on a Class D ICE module, the dual-mono amp is rated at 140Wpc into 8 ohms. That number seems conservative because it kicks like a 200-watter. The sleek low-profile design is matched by first-rate construction quality. Sonically, the era of apologizing for Class D under-performance is over. Music simply snapped into view, in full harmonic bloom. Most vivid were dynamic contrasts from the micro level to the macro. The S300 was both fast and explosive off the mark, while timbral information, its ability to define the character and personality of each musical element, was in full-color display. The S300 wears its speed and rhythmic integrity like a badge of honor. (333)

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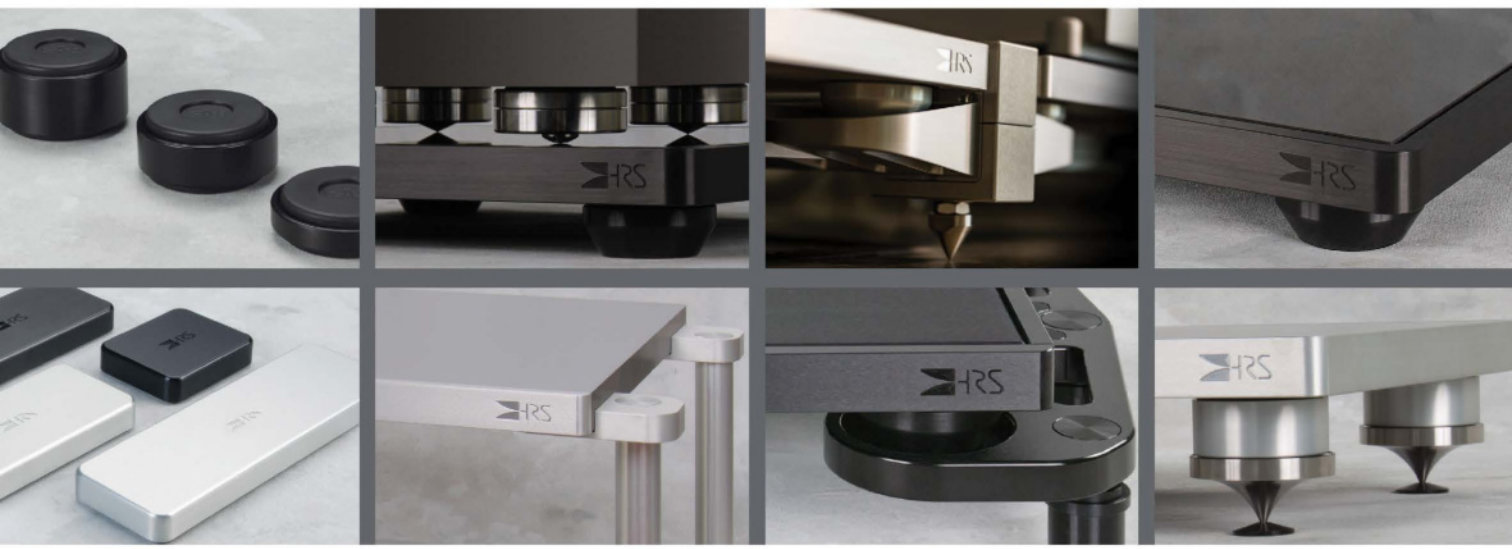

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NAD C 298

$2399

NAD's C 298 is built around a new Class D output stage called "Eigentakt" ("self-clocking") that represents a significant technical advance in switching amplification. The C 298 is rated at 185Wpc into 8 ohms and 340Wpc into 4. The amplifier is packed with features, including balanced and single-ended inputs, variable gain, a bridging function for monaural operation, and an auto-on feature when signal is detected. The C 298 sounds like a powerhouse, with effortless dynamics, a tight and solid bottom end, and a general sense of ease during complex passages. The C 298 also has an unusually satisfying ability to convey music's rhythmic flow and forward propulsion. The midrange has nice presence, with a bit of forwardness from the upper mids to the lower treble imparting a lively quality. The C 298's soundstaging was outstanding—big, open, spacious, and detailed, with precise image placement. A lot of amplifier for the money. (313)

NuPrime AMG One

$2900/pr.

The AMG One is the Evolution Two's little brother, offering about half the power delivery (170W/8 ohms) in a similar circuit topology, incorporating NuPrime's proprietary "Only Distortion Cancellation" (ODC) feedback circuit. The front end is fully analog. Both the preamp stage and the Class D pulse-modulation circuit use the excellent NJR MUSES8820 op-amp. The AMG One not only measures extremely well, but its ultra-low THD and signal-to-noise figures translate into perceptual excellence. It floats a soundstage with a remarkably low noise floor and sterling transparency. It readily retrieves low-level detail aided by its almost spooky silence between notes. The music ebbs and flows with exemplary textural purity and without any obvious tonal bias. Fine-tuning a Class D design is no easy task, but it would appear that NuPrime is most definitely on the right track. (341)

Odyssey Stratos

$2950/pr.

These $2950-the-pair, ultra-high-speed, ultra-high-bandwidth monoblocks from Klaus Bunge are phenomenally good for the money. Of course, there is a reason for this—their family heritage. As was the case with Klaus' near-equally wonderful Khartago stereo and mono amps, the Stratos uses the same circuit as Germany's celebrated Symphonic Line monoblock amplifiers. Even if you A/B'd these monoblocks with super-amps like Soulution's 711 (as JV did), you might still find yourself pondering whether the difference in sound justifies the difference in expenditure. That JV ultimately (and definitely) thought it did is beside the point. The way he sees it, the fact that the Odyssey Stratos monoblocks could give even a picky listener like him pause makes them super-amps in their own right. Yes, you can buy better. The question, as JV said in his review, is: "Do you really want to?" (248)

Audio By Van Alstine DVA M225

$3498/pr.

These high-power (225Wpc into 8 ohms), moderately priced monoblocks trace their origin to the 1980s and Frank Van Alstine's reworking of the Dynaco ST-120. That fundamental circuit—now realized with many refinements, the best modern components, and large fully regulated power supplies—forms the heart of the DVA M225. Within its power limits, the amplifier is one of the most neutral and revealing around at any price. The M225 may not have had the dynamic energy of far more powerful amplifiers in the lowest frequencies at extremely high volumes, but control of bass dynamics and detail were very good. The DVA M225's soundstaging gets high marks, too, for its natural depth, width, and detailed placement of voices and instruments that are of natural size. Note that the DVA M225 offers XLR inputs only, but Van Alstine offers an RCA-to-XLR converter for $279. (327)

Rogue Audio DragoN

$3995

The DragoN is a sophisticated hybrid-tube/Class D design that stands atop the Rogue lineup. Boasting 300Wpc into 8 ohms, the DragoN manifested a level of near-granular finesse and clarity, from the snap and rattle of a snare drum at the back of the hall to the flutter of a harp. Speed and transient information were naturalistic and lively and tonal balance predominately neutral, with glimmers of midrange warmth and a well-defined presence range. Strings were particularly well-rendered and distinct, with contrasting attack and resonances. Bass response and retrieval were superbly controlled. And always lurking at the ready was the voice of authority, eager to reproduce an organ's pedal points or the heavy left hand of a pianist striking the bottom-octave keys of a concert grand. Not just another high-powered beast, the Rogue Audio DragoN is truly a splendid piece of electronics. (311)

Cambridge Edge W

$4000

Reviewed alongside Cambridge Audio's Edge NQ network preamplifier, the 100Wpc Edge W power amplifier delivers on this London manufacturer's definition of Great British Sound. Opposing-symmetry twin transformers (which cancel electromagnetic interference) contribute to a substantial physical presence, but the performance is anything but heavy. Instead, look for sonic clues in a signal path of just 14 components. It's this less-is-more approach (also wonderfully realized in the minimalist aesthetic) that has resulted in a power amplifier with surprising transparency and composure. Neither imposing nor polite, the W is a fitting 50th Anniversary celebration from a company known to provide innovation and value. (301)

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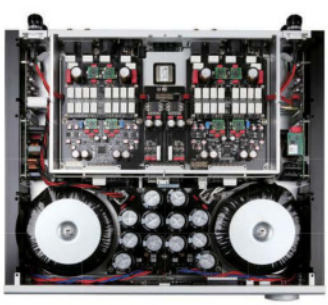

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NuPrime STA Evolution

$4995

Class D amplifiers keep getting better and better, and the NuPrime STA is a prime example. The power-stage topology is full bridge, providing push-pull differential operation with NuPrime's proprietary MOSFET drive design. Power output is a generous 230Wpc into 8 ohms and 310Wpc into 4 ohms. The front end is fully analog. Both the preamp stage and Class D pulse-modulation circuit use the NJR MUSES8820 op-amp. The STA's sonic personality is much like that of distilled water, lacking intrinsic flavor. It simply reflects the character of upstream components, making it a good match for a tube preamp, if you're after a sweet and warm system personality. Its strong suits are tonal purity, soundstage transparency, an expansive depth perspective, and excellent bass control. It's hard to believe that any amp at this price point, let alone a Class D amplifier, is capable of such exquisite musicality. (330)

Amped America AMP 2400

$5000

The AMP 2400 is 400Wpc Class D basic stereo power amplifier Unlike many Class D power amplifiers that use a Texas Instruments, Hypex, or ICE power module, the AMP 2400 uses a Pascal ProXS2 amplifier module. Its chassis is made of six separate CNC-machined aluminum sections designed to allow for maximum thermal flow. The AMP 2400 also employs a high-quality, low-noise fan to permit cooling in a way that solid heatsinks simply can't. The AMP 2400 delivered superb dynamic contrast and image specificity coupled with exemplary low-level detail. If you require a powerful, efficient, and ridiculously neutral power amplifier, the AMP 2400 can deliver the goods. (338)

Atma-Sphere S-30 Mk 3.3

$5100

The Mk 3.3 version of this 30Wpc Circlotron OTL amplifier nudges performance higher in dynamics and soundstage transparency. Although guilty of slight timbral alterations and a somewhat dark tonal balance, these acts of commission, likely due to load interactions, point out the need for a compatible loudspeaker and front-end electronics. The S-30 strikes an intelligent balance between quality and quantity, focusing as it does on delivering a strong first watt. Its asking price is a small price to pay for a generous slice of musical heaven. (261)

Pass Labs XA25

$5150

The XA25 amp is among Pass Labs' most humble efforts—at least outwardly. The solid-state, single-ended Class A design is rated conservatively at 25Wpc into 8 ohms, so users will need to be a little respectful about speaker selection. Beyond that, prepare to luxuriate in pure liquid musicality. Pass gear often suggests sweetness and warmth, but the Class A topology of the XA25 takes this quality a luminous step further. Images are conveyed with a weightier sense of physicality—a visceral feeling of mass as well as air. Simply listening to a solo piano revealed heretofore unheard shifts in the micro-dynamics from the player's keyboard touch. Beyond the deep resolution engraved in the XA25's personality was its ability to transform a listening space into a three-dimensional tableaux. (287)

T+A A 200

$5450

This small but mighty (125/250 watts per channel into 8/4 ohms) power amp is part of T+A's 200 Series, a component stack that takes a unique—but undeniably valid—approach to building a reference-level system with a small footprint. Since the fully discrete, thermally protected Class D A200 gets its own chassis, it's not subject to the digital and other noises that pollute modular integrated amps. The sound is straight out of the Swiss school: wide-open, pure, fast, and dynamic, but with an extra dollop of low-end richness. For those seeking reference-class performance in a compact, reasonably priced amp, the A 200 is hard to beat. (335)

AGD Tempo

$5500

This unit is so petite, and runs so cool, you won't believe it can put out 100Wpc into 8 ohms, or 200Wpc into 4! But it can. The big story though is the sound, rich, voluptuous, yet with every tiny little detail you could ever hope to hear. It can compete on nearly equal footing with purist single-ended Class A amps. Less flashy-looking than AGD monoblock amps, it is their most affordable (and only) stereo option. Yet, the GaN (Gallium-Nitride gain device) Class D gain stage is the same design as the ones found in the pricier ones. And even the power supply is the same, though two channels have to share it. The Tempo boasts a power-module PWM frequency of 800kHz, which is very fast, and it sounds fast. Dexterous, agile, it can dance its way into your heart with slow music, too. (338)

Bel Canto Ref600M

$5590/pr.

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Class D monoblock is good enough to qualify as the best all-around power amplifier he's heard to date, regardless of technology or circuit topology. Its combination of extremely low noise (which makes it suitable to drive even highly efficient loudspeakers), precision three-dimensional imaging, relaxed and natural harmonic balance, and power capability makes for a potent package. Couple all its sonic achievements with its relatively modest price, and you have a power amplifier that could well be a benchmark reference for many audiophiles for years to come. (269)

Luxman MQ-88uC

$6295

In the past, tube amplifier introductions by Luxman (which has been manufacturing tube amps continuously since 1961) have typically been a cause for celebration, and the 25Wpc, KT-88-based MQ-88uC is no exception. Modeled after the vintage Luxman MQ-60 amplifier, which dates back to 1969, the new amplifier is a modernized version of the MQ-60 (itself a triode version of the classic Mullard 5-20 circuit). After break-in, the Luxman's twin sonic virtues of clarity and control came into sharp focus. Transients were reproduced with a sense of speed and finesse that pentode amps would be hard pressed to match. Nothing short of a musical treasure. (297)

Anthem STR

$6500

Anthem's STR amplifier is a muscular yet stylish component that outputs 400 watts into an 8-ohm load, 600 watts into 4 ohms, and 800 watts into 2 ohms; there aren't many loudspeakers that this dual-mono design won't readily control. The dual-mono, 65-pound STR features a proprietary input circuit that Anthem calls "a complementary active-loaded cascoded feedback arrangement." Right out of the box, the STR impressed with immediacy, detail, and authority of presentation with all kinds of music. Spatiality and low-end weight were excellent, and there certainly was no question of the STR running out of steam with the most dynamic recordings. Solidly built, great sounding, and a high value. (298)

McIntosh Labs MC275 VI

$6500

The sixth version of this most classic of all McIntosh amplifiers is by far the best, boasting greater tonal neutrality yet without losing the beautifully solid, rounded, dimensional, and natural musicality of its tube origins. Thanks to improvements in the transformers, distortion and noise are far lower than ever, bandwidth higher, dynamic range wider, transparency greater, and transient response better than ever. At 75Wpc (though 90 is typical), the 275 has virtually all the power PS needs, but for those who want more, it's strappable to a 150W monoblock. Whether used alone or with the C22 preamplifier, the MC275 makes utterly fabulous music, and its traditional looks make it, like the C22, a feast for the eyes as well as the ears. (266)

Linear Tube Audio ZOTL Ultralinear+

$6800

The Ultralinear (UL) amplifier expands Linear Tube Audio's portfolio of David Berning designs yet again, and marks Berning's resumption of his "love affair" with TV sweep tubes, namely the 17JN6 Compactron. All of the tubes are auto biased, so there should be no worries about matching them. While 20Wpc into 8 ohms may not sound like much, the UL actually sounds as dynamic as the ZOTL40 and eclipses it in bass definition. Sonically, the UL has much in common with Berning's discontinued but legendary ZH270. Common denominators include transient speed and control beyond the capabilities of ordinary tube amps, as well as electrostatic-like midrange clarity. In DO's estimation the best low-power, push-pull ZOTL power amp Berning has designed to date. (Not yet reviewed is the newly released Ultralinear+ version, same price) (305)

PS Audio Stellar M1200

$6998/pr.

This lithe monoblock amplifier is a happy marriage of old and new technology. It boasts a tube input stage and a Class D output stage that packs colossal power. With 600 watts into an 8-ohm load and 1200 into 4 ohms, it can drive pretty much any loudspeaker with aplomb. And it does. There are few, if any, amplifiers that will grip the bass drivers as tenaciously as the M1200. Its transient speed can only be described as stunning. The treble region can become a little bright, but the overall performance that the Stellar offers is truly stellar. (313)

Sanders Sound Magtech

$7000

This no-nonsense amplifier was designed to drive any loudspeaker load, particularly full-range electrostatics, which can have an impedance of less than 1 ohm in the top octave. The Magtech "sounds as if it had infinite power into anything, with total stability," said REG. The fully regulated power supply is unusual. Delivering 500W into 8 ohms and 900W into 4, and fully stable driving capacitive loads, it is the perfect choice for electrostatic speakers. (211)

Sonja 3

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VTL ST-150

$8500

VTL's ST-150 is a relatively compact yet powerful 6550-based stereo power amp capable of driving a wide range of speaker loads. This classic all-tube push/pull design delivers 150Wpc in its tetrode mode, and, via the flick of a rear-panel toggle, 70Wpc in triode operation. For those who might be intimidated by the idea of tubes, VTL has made the ST-150's manual bias-adjustment fairly straightforward. Sonically, this is a beauty of an amplifier, with highly natural tonal and textural delivery, an impressive layering of dynamics, as well as nice drive and transient pop, and a strong degree of transparency back to the original session. The sense, as it should be, is not of listening to gear but that the gear is a conduit for the music. (251)

MBL Cadenza C21

$9600

Sounding more like a fine linear amp than the hybrid-switching amp it is, the 180Wpc C21 offers much of the lush sweetness and sonic gravity of MBL's own Reference Line 9011 monoblock. It may not have the 9011's slam, but in most other ways the C21 bears a strong resemblance to the flagship's air and dynamic energy. Its top end, where Class D has previously struggled, is smooth and extended, not glassy. Its low end is elegantly controlled but not over-torqued. Rather it has a bit of dark velvet bloom, imparting the full measure of harmonic and ambient decay and timbral resonance with acoustic music. This is an amp that can proudly stand next to the best in its class—switching or non-. (228)

Audio Research VT80SE

$11,000

A 75Wpc hybrid power amplifier using KT150 power output tubes, this latest addition to Audio Research's Foundation Series, the lowest-priced products in the Audio Research lineup, shares a common styling theme with the rest of the series. It is the first Audio Research amplifier with automatic bias setting, which lets the user choose 6550, KT88, KT90, or KT120 output tubes in addition to the stock KT150s. Output tubes are individually fused to protect the circuit against catastrophic tube failure. The VT80SE produces open, detailed sound with exquisite harmonic nuance and shading. (285)

Mark Levinson N°5302

$11,000

The fully discrete, direct-coupled Class AB amplifier (with a circuit derived from the company's much more expensive N°534 amplifier) is rated at 135Wpc into 8 ohms (270Wpc into 4 ohms) but sounds like a much more powerful amplifier. The bass, in particular, has greater dynamic authority and extension than that of many amplifiers with higher output power. The amplifier excels at reproducing transient detail. (322)

Bel Canto Black EX

$11,500

This powerhouse Class D amplifier (350Wpc into 8 ohms, 700Wpc into 4 ohms) sounds more like Class A than Class D. The 25-pound unit has a very neutral sound, with a somewhat laid-back upper-midrange and lower treble that result in reduced listening fatigue. The bass is very well defined—quick and tight rather than warm and rich. The bottom end is also extremely dynamic, and coupled with the virtually Black EX's unlimited power, will exploit the bass output and dynamic capabilities of just about any speaker. (290)

Aesthetix Atlas Stereo

$12,000

Aesthetix's first foray into power amps is an unqualified success. Aesthetically, the Atlas is handsome in a brawny but tasteful way. Its front panel offers a convenient menu-system for input selection and crossover point, the latter feature allowing the amp to easily mate with a subwoofer. Sonically, the amp has great resolution and reflexes, making it a snap to follow interleaved melodic and rhythmic lines. The Atlas creates a cloud of air around each instrument, and a deep convincing sense of space. Indeed, its resolution, timing, and imaging are beyond reproach. Tonally, this amp is on the sweet side in a way that is consonant with real music. (196)

Classé Delta Stereo

$12,999

The Montréal company's stereo amplifier is a brute, designed with difficult loads in mind. It's rated as 250W into 8 ohms and 500W into 4 ohms, and it's doubtful that too many loudspeakers will faze it. The first 12.5W are pure Class A, so significant heat is generated. A silent thermostatically activated fan pulls room air into the device through a louvered vent that is expelled to the rear; so, the top of the amp barely gets warm. There are VU meters in front, two pairs of robust binding posts behind, and Navcom footers underneath. The amplifier provides plenty of muscle when needed but is also capable of subtle dynamic gradations. (312)

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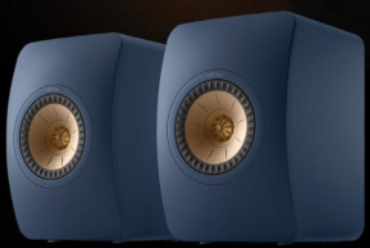

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Chord Electronics Ultima 5

$14,600

The Ultima 5 from England's Chord Electronics is a reimagining of the SPM line, which previously contained Chord's most successful and best-selling products. The Ultima series is more of a ground-up redesign, with all-new circuits and cosmetics. This 350Wpc powerhouse is built around a switching power supply, long a specialty of Chord. When paired with the companion Ultima Pre 3 preamp, the Ultima 5 was unflappable at any volume level and with any kind of music no matter how dynamic or complex. This amplifier is very resolving, but not in an analytical way, instead resolving individual musical lines with ease. Large-scale classical music was particularly rewarding through the Ultima 5. Finally, the industrial design and build-quality are first rate. (339)

Bryston 7B³

$14,990/pr.

This fully balanced, Class AB amplifier packs 600 watts (8 ohms) into a normal-sized, 42-pound single chassis per channel. The previous generation "squared" series improved output-stage performance whereas the newer "cubed" series improves the input stage. The result represents a more refined sound for Bryston overall. The 7B³'s bass extension and stability during demanding musical passages, coupled with relatively low noise, impart an admirable sense of ease to the presentation. Soundstage depth is in keeping with other solid-state amps at its price level, but width and height are exceptional. (269)

Constellation Inspiration Stereo/Mono

$16,000/$32,000/pr.

This 250Wpc stereo amplifier is based on the same circuit as Constellation's $125k Hercules. Through the Inspiration offers a less expensive implementation of the Hercules' topology, Constellation has still managed to bring the big amp's DNA to a more affordable price. Although not a budget item, a Constellation amplifier at $16k is something of a breakthrough. Like the Hercules, the Inspiration Stereo has lifelike illumination in the mids and treble, exquisite resolution of fine detail, and outstanding transparency. Surprisingly, the Inspiration's bass may even be deeper and more powerful than that of the original Hercules. The mono version brings 500W to the party. Sonically, the two are very similar, sharing the Constellation hallmarks of transparency and resolution. Overall, both amplifiers are fantastic values. (249)

PS Audio BHK Signature 300

$16,998/pr.

This 300W (into 8 ohms) hybrid (tube input stage/MOSFET output stage) monoblock is the distillation of all that celebrated electronics designer Bascom H. King has learned about amplifier circuits. The result is a component so rich, natural, and highly resolving that reviewer Anthony H. Cordesman bought the review samples. A genuine masterpiece from an Old Master. (259)

VTL S-200 Signature

$18,000

When WG first reported on VTL's S-200, the sound described was with the factory-delivered output tube complement, an octet of 6550s. As such, the S-200 delivers a healthy 200Wpc in tetrode mode or 100Wpc in its switchable and more romantic-sounding triode setting. As seductive as triode is, WG stuck with the tetrode mode for its less colored presentation. He was perfectly happy with this setup until the day that VTL's Luke Manley suggested he swap in a set of Gold Dragon KT88s. To WG's ears, the S-200 rose to a next level of musical expression and refinement. Instruments sounded more true-to-life, dynamic expression gained in nuance, the air of the recorded spaces as well as around instruments bloomed more, and the experience was that much more immersive. The bass, too, if not as punchy, gained tonal and textural nuance. The KT88s didn't rock like the 6550s, and they were more prone to thermal shut-down, but they added even greater flexibility to an already excellent amplifier. (290/331)

Air Tight ATM-300R

$19,500 without 300B tubes ($20,500 with EH 300B tubes, $24,000 with Takatsuki 300B tubes)

Air Tight has been committed to 300B-based SET amplification for the past 20 years, ever since the release of the iconic ATM-300 in 1999. Mr. Miura, Air Tight's founder, was aiming for an overall sonic presentation that he describes as "tight and clear." The result of his efforts is an extremely transparent soundstage that blows away any residual "cloud cover." The ATM-300R's performance rests on four major sonic pillars working in synergy: velvety textures, remarkable timbral fidelity, superb soundstage transparency and image focus, and a satisfying bass foundation. Reviewer DO has yet to audition a more musically convincing low-power amplifier at any price. (309)

Parasound JC 1+

$19,998/pr.

Redesigned by legendary audio engineer John Curl (hence the JC designation), the 83-pound Parasound JC 1+ not only packs a wallop, but also offers a refined and elegant sound, particularly in the treble. A hefty power supply and power transformer ensure superb image stability and rock-solid bass. When it comes to

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a sense of hall space and dynamics, these monoblocks are difficult to surpass, especially when reproducing blockbuster orchestral works. Their sonic signature is never sterile but voiced on the sweeter side of the musical divide. All the surplus power of the JC 1+ seems to energize the individual notes, resulting in excellent transient response. For power-hungry loudspeakers that feature severe impedance curves, the JC 1+ will provide what amounts to a musical benediction. (316)

Cary Audio 211 FE

$22,995/pr.

A zero-feedback design, the all-triode 211 FE monoblock updates the classic 211 that Cary has produced for 17 years. Though it may lack the ultimate wallop of a powerful transistor unit, and may—if you're into large-scale classical or hard rock—run out of juice before you want it to, this is one gorgeous-sounding amplifier—pure, exciting, and expressive. (205)

Audio Research Corporation Reference 160S

$24,000

This stereo version of ARC's celebrated Reference 160M mono amp combines two channels of the same 140-watt circuit into one chassis—including the same lighted "floating" output meters on the faceplate window—for $10,000 less. The sound is simply gorgeous: detailed, fluid, commanding, alive, and highly musically communicative. It does not sound overtly euphonic in a classic tube way and drove the not-so-easy YG Sonja 2.2 handily. Rather than a tube amp trying to sound more like a solid-state design, the 160S delivers more of what many solid-state amps can't quite fully realize: outstanding 3-D soundstaging, image density, and tonal complexity—while still providing excellent frequency extension, dynamic control, and overall resolution. A stellar tube amp in its price category. (312)

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression S350 and Progression M550

$27,250, stereo; $47,500/pr., monoblock

The Progression series of electronics from Dan D'Agostino brings some of the circuits and technology of the vaunted Momentum line to a lower, but still significant, price. The stereo Progression (monoblocks are also available) is a powerhouse, delivering 300Wpc into 8 ohms. As with all D'Agostino designs going back decades, the Progression can double its output power with each halving of impedance. The innovative "Super-Rail" power supply helps the amp deliver superior dynamic detail, impact, and lifelike realism. (300)

McIntosh Labs MC451

$28,000/pr.

The McIntosh 451 is a truly innovative mono power amp that combines a tube amp for the midrange and highs and a solid-state amplifier for the lows and lower midrange, which allows you to bi-amp your speakers and get the best of tube sound while also exploiting the best of solid-state. Most past efforts to get the best out of both tube and transistor technology used a high-level input to drive a tube preamp that then drives a solid-state power amplifier or a separate crossover to drive two separate amplifiers. The MC451 uses a single input and tube gain stage to drive a crossover to a separate 150-watt tube power amp for the midrange and treble and to a 300-watt solid-state amp for the bass and lower midrange on the same chassis. AHC has heard enough systems and recordings to know that the midrange and treble nuances provided by the MC451 will improve the musicality of a very substantial number of high-end rigs and suit the personal taste of a wide range of audiophiles. (341)

Pass Labs XA160.8

$28,600/pr.

The 160W, Class A XA160.8 monoblock is yet another inspiring and undisputable success from the mind of Nelson Pass—a man who for the past four-and-a-half decades (his first commercial product was released in 1975) has consistently risen to the challenge of besting himself. At the frequency extremes, the XA160.8's transient speed and pitch definition are superb. Its paramount strengths are engaging resolution and transparency, with no vestige of glare or the faintest hint of edge. A genuine triumph. (259)

FM Acoustics FM 108-MKII

$29,600/pr.

Though the latest Swiss firms like CH Precision and Soulution may be getting the lion's share of attention in the press, venerable Swiss companies like FM Acoustics are still fully competitive. Consider this extremely compact, fairly powerful (70W/66V/15A into 8 ohms, 130W into 4 ohms), beautifully made, and (given its competition) relatively affordable Class A monoblock amplifier from FM's Manuel Huber. This is a very transparent piece of gear that gives you a keen insight into how recordings are being mastered, how instruments are being played, and how ambient space is augmenting timbre, dynamics, and imaging, and it does all this without adding any sense of the analytic or much color of its own. (285)

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Neil Gader · The Absolute Sound · Issue 322

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Aesthetix Atlas Eclipse

$30,000/pr.

The hybrid solid-state (there is one 6SN7 tube in the gain stage) Atlas Eclipse monoblock is rated at 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into a 4-ohm load—and it is a powerhouse, easily getting the best performance from DS's inefficient Magnepan 20.7s without strain or compression. It is also versatile. For those who use subwoofers with satellite or full-range speakers, the Eclipse can be set up to drive the main loudspeaker while rolling off the low frequencies going to those speakers at 16 different crossover points. The Eclipse does not impose any particular sonic signature upon the music and, far more often than not, reveals air, space, and detail lost on lesser gear. (305)

Audionet Max

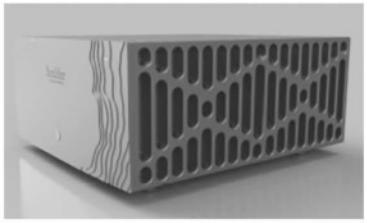
$30,500/pr.

Their more-than-twice-as-tall-as-they-are-wide form optimizes inter-stage isolation and minimizes both power supply disturbances and overall signal-path length. With 400 watts into 8 ohms (700W into 4 ohms/1100W into 2 ohms), and a damping factor of 10,000 at 100Hz, they can control virtually any loudspeaker, be it dynamic, planar, or ESL, no matter how difficult the load. With vivid harmonic texture, superbly delineated pitch, enormous detail, and lifelike tone color and harmonic bloom, the Maxes breathe life and air into soundstages like few other solid-state competitors. These are truly exceptional monoblocks by any means of comparison, not just at their asking price. (279)

Zanden Audio Systems Model 8120F

$30,500 (including balanced XLR inputs w/input transformers)

For JV, this large, beautifully built and finished, KT120-tube-based, 100Wpc stereo amplifier from Japanese manufacturer Zanden is one of the great surprises of this audio season. Why a surprise? First, though scarcely inexpensive, it is considerably less money than Zanden's typical gourmet-audio offerings. Second, though completely tube-powered and tube-rectified, it has none of the image blur, dynamic laxness, ambient grain, and timbral heaviness of typical Class AB KT120-based push-pull tube amplifiers. On the contrary, it is exceedingly fast on transients, extremely hard-hitting, extraordinarily finely detailed, with taut bass that is virtually indistinguishable in grip, definition, and impact from that of much top-tier solid-state, and imaging and staging that are truly wall-to-wall. It is also capable of sounding "real" on any number of well-recorded discs no matter the type of music. (243)



Boulder 1160

$36,000

Part of Boulder's least expensive series of electronics, this 300W (into 8 ohms, 600W into 4) stereo amplifier delivers a massive amount of clean, high power and does so in ways that have advantages over much of the competition, including amps that claim similar output power. The 1160 can drive almost any speaker to its limits without changing sound quality, and it can handle even the most demanding mid- and deep-bass transients in an almost effortless fashion. The 1160's bass is very tight and "fast." Many other amps, particularly Class A amps, seem slightly "warmer" and provide more apparent low-end energy, but they do this at the cost of pitch definition. A superb product. (286)

Krell KSA-i400

$36,000

A monster Class A amplifier, packing 400Wpc into 8 ohms and a whopping 800Wpc into 4 ohms, the Krell KSA-i400 offers 164V peak-to-peak output voltage and 58V rms, with 62 amps of peak output current and a damping factor of greater than 800. Add to that 5400VA of transformers and 188,000uF of capacitance, and you can drive pretty much anything effortlessly. The amp maintains Class A by using a new iBias circuit topology that checks current and adjusts bias to maintain a preset low current in a feedback design monitoring speaker impedance. Krell also implements an Internet-based control and monitoring system to access power, temperature, balance, etc. from an app. This stereo amp simply sounded right. The speed, agility, low-frequency sock, and dynamic scale screamed Class A on steroids. Yet it maintained the nuance and finesse, the midrange bloom, and high-frequency blossom that Class A delivers without the power limits that we have come to expect. (339)

Audio Research Corporation 160M

$38,000/pr.

The product of two years of research and development, the Reference 160M monoblock doesn't sound like any other ARC amplifier JV has heard, and he's heard just about all of them. Gone are the characteristic brightness—the incandescent "top-down" tonal balance—and the soft grainy noise that any ARC fan has grown used to. Gone, as well, is some (not all) of ARC's traditional and

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seemingly limitless spaciousness and bloom. In their stead are a more neutral (maybe slightly bottom-up) tonal palette, audibly lower noise (resulting in zero grain), more and more focused detail, richer timbre, a fuller power range, and a markedly increased sense of control over every aspect of the presentation. This increase in grip, color, and resolution may be the result of the biasing scheme (the 160M is one of the first ARC amps with auto-bias). (294)

CH Precision A1.5

$39,500 ($75,000, two chassis dual mono configuration)

The Swiss company CH Precision has come on strong in recent years. Its latest entrant into the amplifier wars is the solid-state A1.5 amplifier, an upgraded version of its A1 amplifier that can be run in a variety of configurations, included bridged or mono. Indeed, the amplifier can be divvied up to run two main loudspeakers and two subwoofers simultaneously. With a new 1700VA toroidal transformer, the A1.5 boasts plenty of power, enough to drive pretty much any loudspeaker with aplomb. Its excellent tonality, low noise floor, and taut control ensure that it always delivers the musical goods. (305)

Absolare 845 Passion

$41,250/pr. ($53,500)

These gorgeous, leather-clad single-ended-triode monoblocks deliver the glories of SET circuits in a cost-no-object implementation—gorgeous timbre, a smooth and relaxed treble, tremendous soundstage depth and dimensionality—but do so with enough power to drive real-world loudspeakers to satisfying playback levels. Their 52 watts, coupled with genre-defying bass extension and dynamic impact, deliver qualities that fly in the face of conventional wisdom about SETs. But the Absolare's real magic is in the sense of immediacy—that impression of hearing contemporaneous music-making unencumbered by the electro-mechanical contrivance of the playback system. The result is a deep immersion in the musical expression. (234)

MBL Noble N15

$41,600/pr.

Class D amplifiers have come a long way since JV reviewed several of the first high-end samples way back when. This latest version from MBL's engineering genius Jürgen Reis is not only flat-out powerful (560W/36A into 4 ohms); it is also (unlike first-generation D) relatively load, level, and frequency independent, thanks to Reis' LASA 2.0 technology, which, among other things, uses a massive analog power supply rather than a switching supply. Sweet on top and a shade bottom-up in overall balance, the N15 is not the last word in resolution or treble extension (even in the MBL line), but then it doesn't cost what that last word costs. What it is is unfailingly enjoyable, powerful, and musical, and, given the right source and pairing, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and of a soundfield of outstanding breadth, width, and depth. (287)

Lamm Industries ML2.2

$47,890/pr.

These 18W single-ended triode monoblocks are so magical (with a load-appropriate loudspeaker) that they made RH question the paradigm of high-powered solid-state amplification. The directness of expression, the palpability of images, and the purity of timbres are simply sensational through the ML2.2. These amplifiers make it sound as though the musicians are speaking through time and space directly to you. It's an uncanny quality that must be experienced to be appreciated. The ML2.2 achieves this level of sonics not through a euphonic or tubey sound, but by conveying the virtues of SET amplification without SET colorations. With the right loudspeaker (a big caveat), the ML2.2s don't sound like tubes, SET, solid-state, or any other technology. Rather, they sound like music. (230)

Absolare Hybrid Stereo Signature Edition

$52,000

Absolare has managed to capture much of the magic of its reference-class products in the Hybrid Stereo power amplifier. The Hybrid combines tubes in the front end with a 275Wpc (4 ohms) solid-state output stage, and yet there's no hint of transistors in the Hybrid's sound. It has astonishing liquidity of timbre, is utterly grain-free, and projects that elusive sense of midrange presence that is the hallmark of the best SETs. The Hybrid creates a directness of musical expression—of hearing nothing between you and the music—that is unique among solid-state amplifiers, in RH's experience. (322)

Soulution 501

$55,500/pr.

Though these monoblocks from Germany are "limited" to 120W into 8 ohms (240W into 4, 480W into 2), don't let the specs fool you. Thanks to their new switching power supplies, these ultra-high-bandwidth Class AB solid-state amps are capable of delivering better than 75 volts and 45 amps into any load at a damping factor of over 10,000, giving them absolutely killer grip, extension, and clout in the bass—and everywhere else. Add to this a welcome density of color in the midrange and an exceptionally sweet treble, and you get what are the most lifelike solid-state amplifiers JV had heard in his home until the arrival of the Soulution 711 stereo amp. (236)

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Constellation Centaur II Stereo/ Mono

$57,000/$114,000 pr.

Very high resolution and voluptuous tone color generally don't go together in hi-fi gear, and when they do—as in Class A triode tube circuits or Class A solid-state ones—they often do so at a price in neutrality. Such amps and preamps seem to have what brilliant engineer Michael Børresen wittily calls a "bottom-up" kind of sound. That is, their sonic "center of gravity" seems to lie in the upper bass and lower midrange. Though the 250Wpc Class AB Constellation Performance Series Centaur stereo amp would probably qualify as a "bottom-up" amp, in that it has a slightly darkish overall balance, it doesn't trade off as much upper-midrange and treble-range air and bloom as typical Class A amps do. It has gorgeous color and texture on top, coupled with an uncanny ability to resolve very fine details without etching or "spotlighting" them. (223)

Constellation Revelation Taurus

$58,000/pr. (stereo version, $29,000)

Part of Constellation's trio of Revelation series solid-state electronics, the Taurus monoblocks make musical magic. Sonic compromises such as accurate-but-analytical, silky-but-smeared, musical-but-veiled simply don't apply. You get it all: life-like tonal balance, refined resolution, expansive soundstaging, fantastic dynamic range and control—all in a compelling musical whole. The Taurus mono amp puts out 500 watts and sounds more powerful than many similarly rated products. Though housed in less elaborate case work than its more expensive brethren, the Taurus delivers much of the higher-level Constellation magic at less lofty prices. (294)

T+A M 40 HV

$62,850/pr.

T+A, a German company whose initials stand for Theory plus Application, isn't engaging in idle theorizing when it comes to its nifty M 40 HV amplifier. This monoblock's sound is never less than sinuous and controlled. It is constructed around two 6SN7 input tubes in Class A with a solid-state output stage that features MOSFET transistors. The benefits of this hybrid approach are immediately apparent. These amps are never strident or cacophonous. Quite the contrary. As you might well expect with the combination of tubes and MOSFETs, the M 40 HV offers a plush sound that delivers a richly rewarding rendition of everything from jazz to classical music. (316)

Zanden Model 9600mk2

$70,000/pr.

For those of you who own speakers that don't require the last word in power, it is difficult to imagine a more appealing amplifier than this drop-dead-gorgeous-looking Class A/AB tube monoblock from the great Japanese engineer Kazutoshi Yamada of Zanden Audio Systems. Capable of 60W in Class A (and 100W in Class AB), the flagship Model 9600mk2 drives a fairly efficient but somewhat difficult speaker like Raidho's D-5.1 to new levels of resolution, transient speed, timbral accuracy, and overall realism, while maintaining decent (though not world-beating) grip in the Raidho's tough-to-control bass. Powered by twin 845 triodes, the Model 9600mk2 is a veritable model of neutrality, producing a near-divinely natural tonal balance from top to bottom, without any hint of excess darkness or brightness. (293)

MBL 9008 A

$70,200/pr.

The massive (better than two-feet long and tipping the scales at 200 pounds), high-current, high-bandwidth, high-power (440W into 8 ohms, 840W into 4 ohms, 1000W into 2 ohms), very-low-distortion, Class AB 9008 A monoblock amplifier sits just behind MBL's even more massive and powerful 9011 monoblock in the company's Reference Line. Both amps were designed by Jürgen Reis, which is tantamount to saying that both amps are bullet-proof technical and sonic marvels. Built using the finest parts, the 9008 A is a beast with a velvet voice. Seemingly inexhaustible speed, power, and plumb-the-depths resolution are here mated to a dark, rich, beautiful tonal palette. The result is something very like what you hear with Soulution's finest amps—a gorgeous bottom-up presentation with the solidity of an ebony pillar. (Forthcoming)

Esoteric Grandioso M1X

$71,000/pr.

The M1X monoblocks are refined tigers. "Refined" because they demonstrate purity, control, and spellbinding clarity. "Tigers" because each amp effortlessly delivers 300 high-current watts into 8 ohms and 1200 watts into 2 ohms—enough for the most challenging loads. The M1's presentation, like the rest of the Grandioso stack, is more upfront than that of traditional Japanese gear, which tends to be laid-back. (280)

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Soulution 711

$74,975

Like Soulution's 501 monoblocks (but even more so), this massive, seemingly inexhaustible stereo amplifier is capable of virtually unlimited current and amperage regardless of load. Slightly dark and very rich in tone color, blessed with tube-like dimensionality and bloom, sweet and subtle in the treble, standard-settingly powerful and well defined in the bass, ultra-fast on transients, excellent at resolving inner detail, with a soundstage the size of the Ritz, the 711 hasn't any obvious weaknesses. JV has never heard a solid-state amp that is more thrilling powerful or ravishingly beautiful or consistently realistic than this beastie boy from Zurich. TAS' 2014 Overall Product of the Year Award winner, still a top contender, and JV's reference. (249)

Audio Research Reference 750 SE

$75,000/pr.

Surpassing the performance of ARC's last-generation behemoth, the 610T, the 750 SE is the best-sounding amplifier reviewer Don Saltzman has heard. It has an extended but smooth high-end frequency response with excellent control and extension in the bass. With an immense power supply, the 750 SE outputs a true 750 watts through its 4-, 8-, and 16-ohm output taps and has the power to drive any loudspeaker load to satisfying levels without strain. Apparently as a result of its huge power reserves, the 750 SE surprises in its capability to deliver uncompressed bandwidth and delicacy at low listening levels. All in all, a groundbreaking design that is hard to beat if you are looking for an effortless presentation that sounds amazingly like the real thing. (290)

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum

$79,950/pr.

The Momentum amplifiers deliver very high power—1800 watts, to be precise—in a delectably attractive package. The large meter in front, modeled after a Swiss watch, lets you know how much power you're outputting to the loudspeakers, but it's almost impossible to tax these babies. For one thing, each unit contains an 1800VA linear transformer as well as a 300VA power supply. Unless you're running an Apogee Scintilla of yore, we don't imagine you'll be wanting in the power department. But these amps don't simply deliver brute force. They offer a luxurious, even sumptuous presentation that edges toward the tube-amp side without tipping over into it. Newly updated MxV version not yet reviewed. (279)

David Berning 211/845

$80,000/pr.

In the 211/845, David Berning has created the most ambitious realization yet of his brilliant ZOTL circuit that allows a tube amplifier to operate without an audio output transformer. The 211/845 offers 60W of pure Class A triode tube power (via either 211 or 845 output tubes) with no feedback. The 211/845 conveys the beauty of instrumental timbre and voices with a stunning realism and immediacy. The impression that everything between you and the music has been stripped away is astonishing. In this regard, the 211/845 simply has no peer, tube or solid-state. Surprisingly, the bass is well defined and tuneful, although not the last word in dynamic impact. The highish output impedance and limited current delivery dictate that the 211/845 be matched with a loudspeaker of appropriate sensitivity and impedance. But driving the right loudspeaker, the 211/845 is transcendental. (265, 276)

Pass Labs Xs 300

$85,000/pr.

AHC has been using Pass amps as one of his references for years, and he had real doubts whether this new design from Pass could sound all that much better than what he was used to. Well, the devil lies in the details, and the Xs 300 monoblocks provide those details in as neutral and accurate a manner as any amplifier he's heard. Outstanding in all the usual areas for a reference-quality amplifier, but the deep bass and transition from the upper bass and midrange truly enhance the musical experience. So does a level of dynamic life and detail that has to be heard rather than described in words. Capable of driving even the most demanding speakers, it produces 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into 4 ohms and has a maximum power output of 60 amps. (243)

Tidal Ferios

$85,000/pr.

This beautifully built middle amplifier in Tidal's three-product range is brimming with clever design touches delivered with elaborate execution. The parts-quality, attention to the smallest detail, and fit 'n' finish are as good as it gets. This monoblock delivers 300W into 8 ohms (680W into 4) and sounds like a powerhouse. The bass is robust and well defined, and the midrange has a remarkable sense of transparency and presence. One of the most immediate and least-colored amplifiers RH has heard. (306)

VTL Siegfried Series II Reference

$90,000/pr.

The VTL Siegfried Series II Reference, a second-generation design from Luke Manley and company, has been thoroughly upgraded to compete in the front rank of amplification, tube or solid-state. In plain English, this translates to an amp that never runs out of gas. On the contrary, it can sail with aplomb through the most demanding, complex, and thunderous musical passages. The revisions to the Siegfried also mean that it boasts considerably more refinement and micro-detail than its predecessor. While the noise floor is not as low as that of a top-flight solid-state design, the Siegfried offers a warm and fulsome sound that only tubes can provide. It's also the case that Siegfried boasts prodigious grip and slam in the bass that rivals, or even eclipses, a number of solid-state competitors. An amplifier worthy of its lofty Wagnerian name. (246)

Air Tight ATM-3211

$94,200/pr.

This beautiful and beautifully made all-tube monoblock, powered by a pair of Chinese 211s in a push-pull configuration, generates 30W of Class A power and 120W of Class AB. If you're thinking that these storied, directly heated triodes make for a voluptuously colored sound, you couldn't be more wrong. The 3211 is a neutral, transparent, effortlessly powerful amplifier with simply superb bass (none of the usual "for a tube amp" qualifications needed), superb transient response, and superb resolution. Indeed, it is the most neutral, transparent, and detailed 211 amplifier JV has heard. Paired with a first-rate loudspeaker (e.g., the Zellaton Reference MkII or the Magico M3), it is capable of fool-you realism on just about any voice or acoustic instrument. (Forthcoming)

Ypsilon Hyperion

$98,000/pr.

The Ypsilon Hyperion monoblocks, which outputs a healthy 450 watts, are a hybrid design that features a tube input stage and a solid-state output stage. The tubes add a dollop of warmth and sinuosity to the affair, while the solid-state output provides grip and transparency. The trademark Ypsilon sound—a lack of an electronic signature—is fully apparent in the amazing purity of the notes. The Hyperion does not have quite the slam in the lower bass of its purely solid-state brethren. But it possesses a pitch definition that is pretty much unrivaled. (283)

CH Precision M1.1

$104,000/pr. ($54,000 for stereo version)

This deluxe, Swiss-made, bridgeable, high-current monoblock amplifier that can also run in two-channel mode seems to have some of the sonic DNA of another Swiss company's, Soulution's, world-class electronics. Like Soulution's 701/711 amplifiers, the M1 is ultra-fast on transients, ultra-high in resolution, ultra-low in noise and coloration, and quite beguilingly beautiful in timbre. When the M1 is configured in its default position (no negative feedback), JV reports that he would be hard put to choose between it and Soulution's 711 in every regard save for bass and dimensionality, where the Soulution still holds an edge. When it comes to resolution and speed, however, the two fight to a virtual draw. Indeed, with a less dark (i.e., less "bottom up") balance, the CH Precision perhaps edges ahead in these two critical areas. (259)

Audionet Heisenberg

$105,000/pr.

The massive (145-pound), powerful (530W into 8 ohms, 1050W into 4 ohms, 2100W into 2 ohms), all solid-state Audionet Heisenberg monoblock is a beast. While GW acknowledges the remarkable advancements in solid-state amplification over the past dozen years or so, nothing else in his immediate experience better demonstrates the transistor's ability to accurately and artfully combine delicacy with power, focus with bloom, resolution with body, detail with texture, and clarity with expressiveness than the Heisenberg (and its companion Stern preamp). (306)

Constellation Hercules Stereo II

$125,000

The Hercules II stereo amplifier from Constellation uses the same updated circuitry found in the Hercules II monoblocks. Quite naturally, it sounds very much like the Hercules IIs, minus the ultimate in power and separation that the monoblocks deliver. Having said this, at 550Wpc into 8 ohms, 750Wpc into 4 ohms, and 1kW into 2 ohms, the Hercules Stereo II isn't likely to leave you wanting for oomph with any loudspeaker load, reasonable or unreasonable. As neutral in balance as any solid-state amp out there, the Constellation, as you would expect given its price, delivers just about everything that an ultra-high-ender is looking for: resolution, color, staging, imaging, transient speed, and dynamic impact that are the equals of any other top-tier solid-state amplifier JV has heard. (Not yet reviewed)

VAC Signature 450 iQ

$126,000/pr.

These gorgeous, gorgeously made, ultra-expensive, two-box (separate power supplies), 450W monoblock tube amplifiers equipped with VAC's "iQ" system (designed to keep each amp's complement of 14 KT88s and 6SN7s precisely at ideal bias) represent designer Kevin Hayes' "all-out" effort to produce audio gear without the usual constraints of expense, time, and difficulty of manufacture. The results are phenomenally lifelike. Here is a suite of glass-bottle electronics that has pretty much the same resolution and transient speed as the world's best transistor gear. No, the Signature 450 cannot do the bottom octave and power range with the grip and wallop of Soulution's 701/711, but this ain't your granddad's tube low end, either. (And JV is probably old enough to be your granddad, so listen up.) And of course, its midrange and treble are simply and gorgeously dense in tone color and low-level texture. (263)

Boulder 2150

$128,000/pr.

The Boulder 2150 monoblock amplifier is an engineering marvel. It offers a smooth, seductive, and powerful sound that places it in the very highest echelon of solid-state amplification, perhaps superseded only by its big brother in the Boulder 3000 Series. With its 1000 Class A watts on call, this amplifier can pretty much deliver limitless power, but the most remarkable aspect of the 2150 is its control—the softest passage is delineated with what appears to be the utmost timbral fidelity. Cymbal swishes hover in the air for what seems like an eternity. And the ease with which you can follow a bass line when delivered by the 2150 is a distinct pleasure. Does it breach the tubes versus solid-state divide? No. The texture and dimensionality supplied by tubes remain a separate province. But the Boulder builds on the many virtues of solid-state to provide an amazingly realistic reproduction of recorded sound. (249)

Lamm Industries ML3 Signature

$144,690/pr.

This four-chassis, 32Wpc, $145k SET may strike some of you as the Poster Child for Audiophile Excess, but the Lamm ML3 Signature monoblock amplifier takes the definition of the absolute sound and turns it on its head. For 30 years, the illusion of live unamplified instruments in space has been what we've been aiming for. Now with this Lamm-attack on the state of the art we can (almost) throw away the word "illusion." The ML3 Signature approaches what we all seek in the reproduction of music—the actual sound of live instruments in space—by reducing or eliminating two of the major sonic colorations that reviewers harp on: electronic haze and midbass overhang. The cost of entry is unquestionably high, but the ML3's performance is even higher. (208)

Air Tight ATM-2001

$150,000/pr.

As impressed as JV was and is by VAC's Signature 450iQ amplifiers, these beautifully designed and engineered flagship monoblocks from the late, legendary Miura-san of Air Tight are just as sonically impressive. Somewhat darker and fuller in balance (with 6550s) than Kevin Hayes' masterpieces, they are also bloomier and more present than the VACs and at least as high in speed and resolution (which is to say, as high as tube electronics get). Although it could be argued that the ATM-2001s are inherently a bit "tubier" in presentation than the VACs, what has been retained here of the classic tube sound is no more nor less than all that is worthy of retaining: the three-dimensional "action" and illuminated-from-within textural details that bring voices and instruments to fullest life. (269)

Soulution 701

$175,000/pr.

A pair of power amplifiers that cost more than a Mercedes S-Class? Yes, but if you have the dough, there may not be a more musically compelling amplifier on the planet. The massive 701s break new ground in sheer dynamic verve and vivid immediacy. Although not forward-sounding, the 701s convey a sensational lifelike presence in both timbre and dynamics that puts them in a class by themselves. Instrumental entrances fairly jump from the loudspeakers with hair-raising realism. And then there's the phenomenal bass that must be heard to be believed. These amplifiers have a bottom-of-the-earth solidity and dynamic impact unlike any other amplifier. The Soulution 701s are mega-priced, but they also deliver mega-performance. (249)

CH Precision M10

$198,000/four chassis dual mono configuration ($104,000 two chassis M10)

These flagship amplifiers from Swiss manufacturer CH Precision are simply unprecedented in set-up flexibility, control, and adaptability to different systems. The 300Wpc stereo amplifier can be operated as a monoblock or in active or passive bi-amp modes. The amplifier's extensive set-up adjustments, including the ability to adjust the ratio of global to local feedback, can be controlled via CH's outstanding app. The 10 Series offers extraordinary sonic performance

and a level of musical engagement that must be experienced to be believed. Although the sound has a pristine clarity and crystalline transparency, the M10 never sounds even remotely analytical. No matter the music, the M10 delivers a heightened sense of the musicians' commitment and intent. Listening to music through the M10 with the companion L10 linestage is a revelatory experience. (323)

darTZeel NHB-468

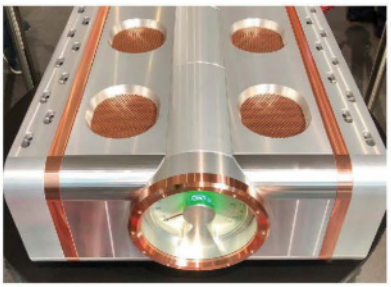
$230,000/pr.

The NHB-468, which can produce up to 2000 watts, offers a superb combination of beauty and the beast. The beauty is immediately apparent—translucent highs and a rich but never cloying tonality that replicates everything from woodwinds to brass with uncanny fidelity and solidity. The beast arrives on the big stuff, from rap to classical, particularly with power-hungry loudspeakers, which the 468 drives with ease. There is something uncanny, even spooky, about the sheer effortlessness with which the amplifier reproduces the most subtle transient information, especially in the treble region. At the same time, its dynamic alacrity means that instruments such as a standup bass sound about as realistic as it gets. Imaging is rock-solid. Devoid of any hint of stridency, the 468 provides a surefire recipe for hours of audio enchantment. (327)

Constellation Hercules II

$250,000/pr.

This updated version of the original 1000W Hercules monoblock is substantially improved in every way. The original delivered reference-quality performance, but with a somewhat polite bottom end. The II's bass is now spectacular, with plenty of heft, weight, and dynamic impact. Not surprisingly, the qualities for which Constellation is known—exceedingly high resolution, transparency, treble delicacy—are even more apparent in the new Hercules. Despite its massive brute-force power, the Hercules II actually has an extremely refined, sophisticated, and filigreed midrange and treble. The casework and visual impact are as impressive as the sound. This is truly a world-class reference. (261)



D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Relentless Epic

$349,500/pr.

The Relentless is Dan D'Agostino's statement amp, no two ways about it. Look under the hood and you can see that no expense has been spared. The Relentless is also anti-globalist—no global feedback is employed. The two sides of each amp perfectly mirror each other for true balanced operation—no bridging of amps here. These (1500W into 8-ohm, rising to 6000W into 2 ohms) beasts are born to run. Compared to the more stentorian amps out there, the Relentless tends to pad the initial transient slightly, so you're not going to get as hard a hit on trumpet or piano as you might with other superb solid-state amplifiers. And the Relentless doesn't have the holographic feel of a top-drawer tube amplifier. At the same time, other amps won't provide you with as luxurious and, in many ways, as realistic a sound as you get with the Relentless. (301, newly updated to the Relentless Epic)

Burmester 159

$350,000/pr.

Everything about Burmester's flagship 159 monaural power amplifier is extreme. Underneath the massive, elegant casework is 396 pounds of raw amplifier fury that can deliver 1400W into 4 ohms. There's a general belief in the high end, not entirely unfounded, that massive dreadnought power amplifiers are good at bombast but lack subtlety, delicacy, and the ability to express musical intimacy. It's the small, featherweight amplifiers that best reproduce small-scale music, the conventional wisdom hold. That assumption was immediately turned on its head by the 159. The amplifier's sonic character was the antithesis of expectations with a highly refined, delicate, liquid, lush, gentle, and grain-free sound. However, when called upon, the 159 shows its other side—an amplifier capable of seemingly unlimited dynamic capability and majestic authority even on the most challenging music. (333)

EXPERT ADVICE
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

- Some integrated amps are simply a preamplifier and power amplifier in one chassis, with no other functions.
- Integrated amps generally produce less output power than separate power amplifiers, although there are some powerhouse integrated amps available.
- Some integrated amplifiers include the preamplifiers features described above (integral phonostage, DAC, streaming capability, etc.)

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

NAD C 328

$599

NAD calls its new integrated amplifier a "Hybrid Digital DAC Amplifier," a moniker that hints at its digital prowess. The C 328 can handle a wide range of digital sources, and indeed, features a topology that keeps signals in the digital domain until the switching output stage. Although the amp is rated at 50Wpc, Paul Seydor found that the C 328 wasn't lacking for power in real-world situations. The C 328 also acquits itself excellently in nuance and resolution. A tremendous bargain and a worthy successor to NAD's legendary 3020 integrated amplifier. (291)

PS Audio Sprout100

$799

Though the original Sprout's compact, retro-modern form factor remains the same, the new Sprout100 offers a number of upgrades and improvements, including a redesigned phonostage and headphone amp, a new DAC (up to DSD128 and 384/24PCM), a tiny indicator LED, and a remote control. Oh, and twice the power: 100Wpc. The Sprout100 has the ability to coax even more open spaciousness, lively musicality, detail, and low-end extension from the small loudspeakers (especially with the "bass boost" option on). Expect big sound and even more bang for the buck. (289)

Bluesound Powernode

$949

This third generation of Bluesound's Powernode is an all-in-one stereo (or multiroom) system for our modern times, incorporating wired and wireless streaming, DAC, analog inputs, full control from the BluOS app, and power amplification. Everything you might need except for phonostage, speaker cables, and speakers, fit into the Powernode's compact chassis. The real story here is the surprisingly good sound for the price, easily fitting right into systems including other components and even cables that cost as much or more than the unit itself, and not embarrassing itself sonically. Slightly on the mellow and forgiving side of neutral, it should pair well with a wide variety of speakers and rooms. (Forthcoming)

NuPrime IDA-8

$1099

Sonically and functionally, there's plenty to love about the IDA-8. Essentially, it's a sleek-looking, small-footprint hybrid Class A/Class D integrated amplifier/DAC that combines Class A warmth and resolution with Class D speed, power, and efficiency. Its DAC supports USB 384kHz/32-bit and DSD256 and is also capable of decoding DoP (DSD over PCM) via coaxial and optical inputs. The IDA-8 delivers substance with plenty of gusto—and does so from an astonishingly quiet background. A great-sounding, stone-cold good deal. (263)

Marantz PM7000N

$1199

The Marantz PM7000N integrated stereo amplifier is a good-sounding product that can shrink audiophile sprawl down to something more manageable without sacrificing what matters most. It's an all-in-one solution that comes equipped with built-in DAC, network streaming, Apple AirPlay, multiple line inputs, multiple digital inputs, and a phono section. Despite having a foot firmly in every camp, its presentation is impactful and gracious—an overall solid performer packed with value. Digital is easy to set up, and while the phono section isn't perfect, it reveals plenty of detail and has a nice, engaging sound. (305)

NAD C 3050

$1399

While the limited-edition NAD C 3050 LE swiftly sold out, the standard-edition NAD C 3050 retains all the LE's features, including 100Wpc of continuous power via NAD's HybridDigital UcD amplifier technology, a Texas Instruments' PCM5242 high-resolution differential DAC (32-bit/384kHz), BluOS high-resolution multi-room music streaming, and Dirac Live room correction. Sonically, its power output sounds and feels like more 100W with warmth, weight, and gravity in the midrange and low frequencies. Imaging is stable; transients are crisp and clean. A hint of low-level veiling and some residual dryness shadow the top octaves, but these are modest subtractions. Nicely appointed, cool-looking, great-sounding, what else could it be but a NAD? (341)

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Rogue Audio Sphinx V3

$1595 ($1695 with remote control)

Rogue products have, like their moniker, usually gone their own way in design, price, and value. The Sphinx integrated amplifier may be the most roguish of the lot. Tubes? 100Wpc (200W into 4 ohms)? U.S. design and manufacture? For $1595? If that's not enough, this is the first Class D amplifier (actually a hybrid with a pair of 12AU7 tubes in the preamp section) that offers world-class sonics. Includes a very fine discrete headphone amp and a user adjustable mm/mc phono section that is worth the asking-price all by itself. (236)

NAD C 399

$2199 (or $2599 as reviewed with Bluos D Module)

NAD'S C399 is streaming integrated amplifier that incorporates too many functions and features to summarize in a capsule. The main talking points are a superb on-board DAC with full MQA capability, an equally superb moving-magnet phonostage, and a pair of slots on the back for modular upgrades to keep the unit future proof (digitally speaking). It was reviewed with Bluos D module ($549) that incorporates Dirac Live, a new digital-signal-processing room/loudspeaker-correction technology. Features aside, most people will be buying this for its basic function as an integrated amplifier. Its 180 watts per channel, the amplifier section deriving from NAD's Hypex HybridDigital nCore Class D circuit, is capable of driving almost any home speaker system to fearsome levels with inaudibly low noise and distortion. (333)

NAD M10 V2

$2499

Don't let its diminutive chassis fool you; NAD's M10 packs a huge amount of technology and performance into a half-width component. The M10 is a wireless, amplified, multi-room streaming-music system. Just connect speakers and a source (which can be a smartphone), and you've got a complete hi-fi with 100Wpc, MQA decoding, and Dirac Live DSP room correction. NAD's BluOS app allows you to control any BluOS or Roon-enabled device to create a multi-room music experience that is simple, intuitive, and easy to operate. Attractive, luxurious, simple to set up and use, small, ridiculously well featured, the M10 is wonderfully enjoyable to listen to when connected to the right speakers for your ears and budget. (M10 reviewed in 298; V2 forthcoming)

Icon Audio LA MKIII

$3150 (standard version, $2495)

The LA MKIII's classic recipe consists of a 6SN7 gain stage, a tube buffer, a tube-rectified power supply, and point-to-point wiring. This elemental combination, together

with excellent engineering, makes the LA MKIII Signature into a formidable line preamp. Tonal colors are reproduced with superb fidelity, vibrant and engaging. Dynamic shadings are nicely drawn out from soft to very loud. Although the stock tube complement isn't particularly romantic sounding, it is responsible for exceptional bass definition and iconic 3D rendering of the soundstage. The LA MKIII's most compelling sonic attribute is tonal gravitas—an authoritative portrayal of the lower midrange, delivered with realistic tonal density. In all, the LA MKIII offers exceptional sound quality that does justice to the sonic promise of the 6SN7. (322)

RotelRA-1592 MKII

$3199

The MKII version of the venerable RA-1592 offered rock-solid musicality across virtually all criteria, with a lush velvety character and a weighty well-defined bottom end. Its wide dynamic range imparted a bone-tingling physicality and impact to large-scale orchestral music. The treble octaves were clean, relatively free of clutter or grain. At the treble extremes there was a minor reduction of air and harmonic bloom and a scarcity of depth cues, but these were trivial subtractions. The 200Wpc Class AB powerhouse sports upgrades to all important circuits, including the capacitors in critical signal paths. Plenty flexible, the MKII supports both traditional Bluetooth streaming plus aptX™, AAC high-quality audio streaming, and MQA and MQA Studio decoding and rendering. The RA-1592 MKII proved itself truthful, articulate and musically compelling—what TAS has come to expect of a 50-year-old brand. (327)

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Cambridge Evo 150

$3249

The Cambridge Audio Evo 150 is an all-in-one streamer, preamp, and stereo amplifier. It outputs 150Wpc and utilizes Hypex NCore Class D amplification, which means it has plenty of power and runs coolly and efficiently. It has a ton of input options, including a phonostage (mm only), RCA, balanced XLR, optical, coaxial, and HDMI ARC for TV control. For streaming, there's AirPlay 2, Chromecast, Spotify Connect, Tidal MQA, and Qobuz; plus, it's Roon Ready. Other outputs include a headphone stage, preamp out, subwoofer out, Bluetooth, and speaker out. It's got Wi-Fi and an Ethernet port and is compatible with a bunch of audio formats (ALAC, WAV, FLAC, many others), and there's a very nice ESS Sabre ES9018K2M DAC in there, too. All those acronyms are necessary to make a point—the Evo 150 does pretty much everything imaginable, all with an attractive design and large front screen. Once setup is complete, the Evo 150 works seamlessly with very little fiddling and maintenance beyond the occasional firmware upgrade. Frankly, it is a pleasure to use, not only because of the otherworldly convenience, but also because of how great it sounded. This could be the box-to-end-all-boxes, or at least a great way to tame the hi-fi sprawl. (338)

Roksan Attessa

$3399

Roksan's all-new, in-house, 80Wpc design embodies where today's marketplace lives. Attessa is the company's first integrated DAC with network streaming capability (and a fine mm phonostage, too). Sonic performance registered high scores across all genres of music. The Attessa was grain-free and non-edgy and wasn't apt to shade or spotlight particular frequency bands. It maintained a ripe and natural midrange, a weighted tonality, a firm and controlled bass, and a smooth if slightly dry top end. Throughout, there was a spotless untrammeled clarity to every note. Attessa was also especially impressive imparting dynamic energy in both the macro and micro senses. Looks, ergonomics, and performance. In NG's book, a real sleeper. (335)

Rogue Audio Cronus Magnum III Integrated Amplifier

$3495

The third iteration of Rogue Audio's Cronus Magnum is one of high end's greatest values. Designed by Rogue's owner Mark O'Brien, the all-tube circuitry of the Magnum III features an upgraded triode preamp circuit coupled with Rogue's Atlas Magnum power amp, improved component parts throughout, a beefier power supply, as well as a phono section that now accommodates both mm and mc cartridges. The sound of this amp is inherently musical. It's warm but not fat; it's airy; its resolution is plenty satisfying. The Magnum III's is not a "wow" kind of sound but rather a *let's pull you into the music* kind of sound. And for those who might otherwise shy away from tubes, there's nothing tweaky about it. It's a pleasure to use and just possibly a classic in the making. (333)

Vincent SV-737

$3499

A large, beefy, classic-looking hybrid amp which should appeal to those who want a compromise between a separate power amp and preamp and the economy and simplicity of an integrated. Rated at 180Wpc into 8 ohms, and 300Wpc into 4 ohms, the 737 boasts a tube preamp section and a Class A/B solid-state power amp. Running in pure Class A up to 10W ensures the sound is particularly fine at low listening levels. MK concluded that, soundwise, it lived up to its marketing claims of combining the best of both worlds, tube and transistor. It bettered all lower-priced choices, proving itself to be a good value. It also includes a good DAC and wireless streaming, though the streaming app is not as versatile as others and may not be able to access any other lossless service than Tidal. (327)

Rogers High Fidelity 65V-1

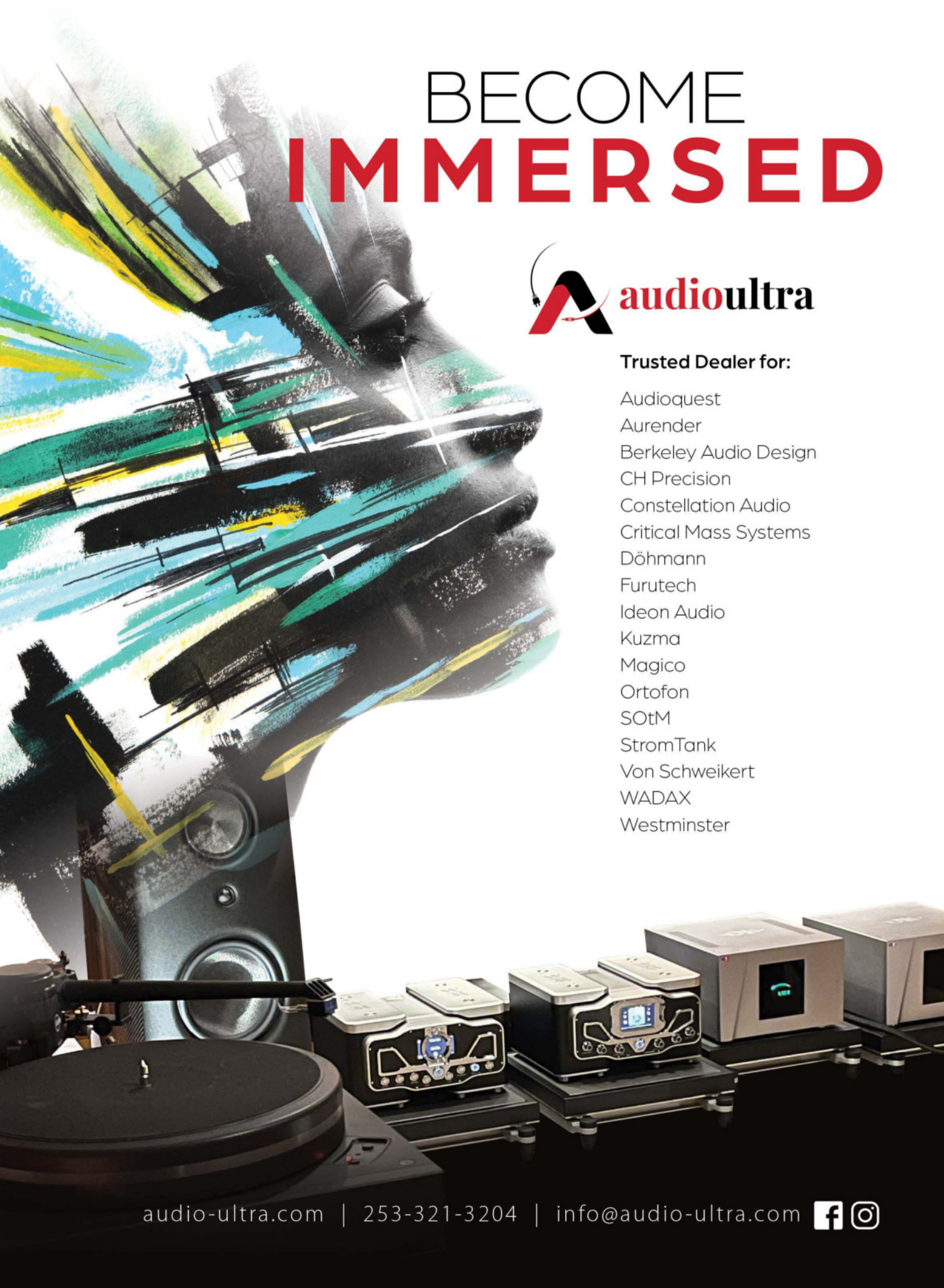
$4200

Classic tube power meets modern technology in aerospace engineer Roger Gibboni's designs—there's a free iOS app enabling control of volume, source switching, and operating mode (Ultralinear or triode). Although intended as an entry-level offering, this integrated is definitely not a watered-down version of one of Rogers' big push-pull amps. In fact, it's something totally different—a single-ended design using one EL34 power pentode per channel (upon request the amp can be shipped with a KT88 beam power tube). Reviewer DO says you really would be hard-pressed to find a more cogent and emotion-packed midrange. (283)

Icon Stereo 40 MkIV

$5295 (Signature)

Elegantly styled and easy to bias, the Stereo 40 actually delivers 55Wpc at clipping. It uses a tried-and-true Ultralinear output stage and is switchable to triode mode via a toggle switch on the front panel. It features octal voltage gain and drive tubes. Selectable feedback (0, 6, and 12dB) makes for flexible system integration. It resolves layers of orchestration exceptionally well and allows low-level detail to float to the surface naturally without the help of any gratuitous upper-midrange brightness. It is far more revealing than that great and beloved classic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UL amplifier, the Dynaco ST-70, which practically sounds fuzzy by comparison. The Stereo 40 propels the music forward with excellent boogie factor, refined grain-free textures, and fidelity to tonal colors. It satisfies DO's appetite for glorious tube sound. An attractive confluence of musical attributes catapult it into the elite class of integrated tube amps. (335)

Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe

$6299 ($5299 line version)

A true multi-discipline, 125Wpc Class AB, DAC-equipped, network-audio performer that summoned a neutral personality throughout the midrange with intimations of extra bloom and body in the mid and upper bass. Orchestral music possessed a firm, of-a-piece signature that was detailed and layered yet stable and immersive. Treble octaves were smooth and non-fatiguing. Transient behavior was unforced and natural, rather than overly etched and prickly. Italy's Gold Note fulfills the expectations of enthusiasts across the generations by having produced a modern, musically engaging, and highly configurable amp. (300)

Naim Uniti Nova

$6899

The Naim Uniti Nova is an 80Wpc integrated amplifier/digital player for the 21st century. Input options include one single-ended analog input, one five-pin DIN input, two USB inputs (one on the front and one on the back), one SD card slot, one HDMI input, one BNC digital input, two coaxial SPDIF digital inputs, two optical TosLink inputs, wireless streaming via Chromecast, AirPlay, Bluetooth (aptX HD), or Wi-Fi (2.4 or 5GHz), and UPnP streaming via its Ethernet connection. The Uniti is also a Roon endpoint. If you need a modern single-box solution that can play from dad's NAS drive or sis' smartphone (and be controlled by any smartphone in the house), the Naim Uniti Nova can make the transition from hairshirt audiophilia to silk-shirt convenience as painless, musically expansive, and audiophile-approved as possible. (284)

HiFi Rose RA180

$6995

Everything about the HiFi Rose RA180 is idiosyncratic, from its four amplifier channels, to the gallium nitride transistors in the switching output stage, to the radical steampunk chassis aesthetic. Two of the RA180's 200W amplifiers can drive a pair of speakers with a single pair of input jacks—nothing special here. Second, bi-wirable speakers can be driven by all four of the RA180's amplifiers. The third option is to bridge the amplifier channels to drive single-wire speakers ("BTL Mode"), increasing the RA180's output power to 400Wpc. Finally, the RA180 offers the option of engaging a high-pass filter on one pair of amplifiers specifically to drive a super-tweeter. In this configuration, two of the RA180's amplifiers drive the full-range speaker, and two drive the super-tweeter with a frequency-response-optimized signal with frequency extension to 100kHz. But the most salient aspect of the RA180 is the elaborate front-panel with its myriad buttons, knobs, meters, and especially the gear-driven volume control and clear panel exposing the elaborate gearing. Sonically, the RA180 sounds like a powerhouse with plenty of headroom and excellent control in the bottom end. The BTL mode, designed for hard-to-drive speakers, turned out to be the best sounding with any speakers. In this mode the amplifier was smoother and with a more fleshed-out soundstage. (334)

Canore Audio AI 1.10

$6999

This pure Class A integrated amplifier is one of Slovakia's best kept secrets. Power delivery is 40Wpc in ultralinear mode from a pair of KT88 beam tetrodes. The KT88s are given full scope of expression via excellent output-iron and a well-filtered power supply. Expect

exceptional soundstage transparency combined with transient clarity—attributes that should keep you content for a lifetime. Resolution of low-level detail is as good as it gets for any tube amp at this or any price point. Ultralinear/triode switching offers the choice of two sonic personalities. Ultralinear mode was DO's clear preference based on greater dynamic conviction and a tonal balance whose center of gravity was squarely in the orchestral power range. On all counts, the Canor AI 1.10 is a superlative amp. It is built to last, and its intelligent warm-up and cool-down cycles will keep the tube complement going strong for years to come. (330)

PrimaLuna EVO 300

$7295

The EVO 300 is the result of a collaborative effort between PrimaLuna and sister company Floyd Design. It represents a departure from PrimaLuna's all-valve amplifier designs, as it marries the EVO 300 preamp's 12AU7 front end with a MOSFET power amplifier. The ultimate goal was to combine the virtues of tube and solid-state amplification. Expect fabulous dynamics and low-end solidity, but the real magic is in the integration of the tube and solid-state sections. Excellent performance at the frequency extremes is coupled with considerable tube magic. Especially with analog sources, soundstage depth and width perspectives are remarkably spacious. This is the hybrid amp DO has been waiting decades for. It is neither bright nor texturally challenged; rather, it exudes musical finesse. And that means 3D soundstaging and the ability to wow the listener with the music's fire and drama. A Dutch treat for the discriminating music lover! (326)

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Bel Canto E1X

$8500

According to Bel Canto's designer John Stronczer, "the E1X Integrated shares its architectural approach with the Bel Canto Black system design." The EX1 utilizes a multi-circuit-board layout. Multiple processors reside on the AMiP board and control the USB, Ethernet, AES, SPDIF, TosLink, and analog input functions, while a dedicated processor contains the MQA decode and rendering function, as well as the MQA-derived filters. The E1X is, in every respect, Bel Canto's best value. It's a high-performance piece of kit that delivers sonics on a par with a combination of reference components at double the cost. If you have limited space to devote to electronics yet desire superlative sound and audio technology, the E1X can do that with style. (308)

Aesthetix Mimas

$9000 (phonostage option $1250, DAC option $1250)

The Mimas is, in a way, an old musical soul. Hip and striking with its clean, precision machining and uncluttered design, the 150Wpc dual-mono, hybrid amp could be just another high-performance entrant in the über-integrated sweeps. However, Mimas, the first integrated from Aesthetix, is something much more than that. Capable of expressing the full palette of tonal and textural color it embodies many of the classic sonic virtues from the golden era of tubes, but with the ease and control and extension that are hallmarks of today's finest solid-state. As it fashions these essentials into a harmonious whole, its character hints of classic midrange warmth and airy treble sweetness with bass response as nimble as it is formidable. Further, Mimas' modular design allows the owner to easily add superb phono and DAC options as the need requires. The very definition of what we all seek from an integrated amplifier. (294, 313, 330)

Norma Audio Revo IPA-140

$9600

As its name implies, Norma Audio's Revo-IPA-140 delivers a healthy 140Wpc into an 8-ohm load or a walloping 280Wpc into 4 ohms. But this sleekly designed Italian beauty is no musical beast. Designed by Norma founder Enrico Rossi, the Norma is a true dual-mono design of two mirrored circuits built within a non-magnetic aluminum chassis. Powering the IPA-140 are a pair of toroidal transformers, separate power supplies for gain, output, and driver stages, and six per-side MOSFET devices rated at 150A peak output current. USB as well as mm/mc phono cards are optional. Sonically the design is among the most tonally neutral and coherent integrated amps WG has encountered, delivering all manner of music with no sense of strain or listener fatigue, even when pushed hard by the largest orchestral forces or demanding rock. (Forthcoming)

Balanced Audio Technology VK80i

$9995

BAT's first all-tube integrated is a stunning piece of industrial art that delivers over 55Wpc of pure triode power. The design combines the 6SN7 dual triode with the unique 6C33C-B power triode, originally designed for avionics applications and famously used as a regulator tube in the radio communications system of the MIG-25 fighter jet. The focus is on simplicity of operation and reliability, hence the automatic-bias circuitry. It sounds far more powerful than a comparable KT88-based amp and shifts gears without changing its sonic character. There is no perceptible textural grain or brightness even when it is driven hard. It is above all else a superb demonstration of triode power that offers a happy escape from the garden-variety push-pull beam-power or pentode amp. (319)

Technics SU-R1000

$9999

This integrated amp bristles with innovative technologies and features. Digital input signals stay in the digital domain, driving the switching output stage directly and greatly reducing signal-path circuitry. The cutting-edge design includes a battery-driven clock, and a phonostage that combines analog and digital circuits to realize cartridge frequency-response correction and crosstalk cancellation. Rated at 150Wpc into 8 ohms and 300Wpc into 4, the SU-R1000 can drive even demanding loads without a sense of strain. The SU-R1000 has excellent bass, with exceptional definition and dynamic realism. Dynamic detail is exceptional from very low to high levels, and so is midrange and upper bass detail. The outstanding phonostage lives up to the sound quality of the rest of the unit. Colorations are very low, dictated more by the source components and speakers than the amplifier. Beautifully built, it is a modern update of classic Technics aesthetics. (317)

Devialet ExpertPro 220

$10,000

The amplifier offers exceptional neutrality arising from an extreme indifference to loading and extremely low distortion. (This is a hybrid amp: It uses a digital circuit to rough out the current demands but the sound you actually hear is that of a Class A output stage that trims the signal to perfection.) A great amplifier if ever was, what makes the ExpertPro 220 unique is Devialet's Speaker Active Matching (SAM) system. You download onto an SD card, and then into the SAM unit, an electronic model of your speaker (Devialet has these models for a vast number of transducers—so your speaker is most likely covered). This model is then used in real-time to correct

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the speaker's lower frequencies to match the input. SAM lowers distortion, makes timing correct, and extends response down—a long way. (The speaker is monitored so that overload never happens, but as much bass extension is generated as the speaker is capable of.) A revolution in audio amplification for speakers. (298)

MBL Cadenza C51

$11,600

With its soft, understated lines, svelte controls and connectivity, and jewelry-like finish, it's easy to misjudge the depth, complexity, and sonic resolve of the C51—a 180Wpc, modified Class D tour de force. It has the touch of the classicist in terms of the import it places on the finest inner details, and its resolution of acoustic space is almost eerie in its specificity. Its top-end is top-notch—airily extended with none of the early era Class D veiling that often constricted and cloaked these octaves. Designer Jürgen Reis' hybrid topology known as LASA is unerringly open, airy, and sweet where appropriate, yet also highly charged and aggressive when so called upon. The main issue that listening to the C51 provoked was the way it integrated individual criteria—frequency, imaging, dynamics, transients—and wove them together into a seamless tapestry of reproduced sound. A triumph in its category. (243)

Balanced Audio Technology VK-3500

$11,995

The VK-3500 is a hybrid design that marries a tube preamp stage with a solid-state power amplifier section. (It can also be had with an optional phonostage.) Effortless in sonic delivery, the VK- 3500 offers a remarkably complete package combining loads of user flexibility with a clean, neutral, detailed, balanced, and coherent voice that beautifully conveys music's myriad aural, intellectual, and emotional elements. Not for those seeking the seductive golden warmth offered by some tube designs, this BAT is definitely more Audio Research than Conrad-Johnson. (280)

Pass Labs INT-250

$12,600

A force to reckon with, the muscular INT-250 with 250Wpc (and 500Wpc into 4) embodies effortless dynamics, ultra-wide bandwidth, superb low-end control and grip, and effortless, unpretentious highs. Optimized for greater flexibility with grunt-worthy speaker loads of 86dB efficiency or less, its soothing and seductive sonics are an ideal companion for analog LP playback—this Pass integrated just makes you want to spin vinyl endlessly. Remarkable, too, is the amp's lush midrange that pushes a loudspeaker to the very edges of its performance envelope. (263)

T+A PA 2500 R

$13,750

The highboy integrated amp of the vaunted R Series from Germany's T+A elektroakustik, the 140Wpc PA 2500 is twice as tall as, and more powerful and equipped with more connectivity than, its nearest sibling. It includes a dual-mono, fully balanced, high-voltage amplifier in an AB configuration, with a hefty Class A bias for the first 20–25 watts. Sonically, it is firmly in the camp of balance and control. Musical images are rooted in position and vocals are models of stability. Its most identifiable character trait is its wideband spectral response and dynamic extroversion. The PA 2500 delivers big, high-intensity wattage that never seems to waver in delivery or extension regardless of load. Even its phonostage is a real contender rather than a second-string bench warmer. Wunderbar! (275)

Esoteric F-03A

$14,000

If you lust for Esoteric's ultra-expensive Grandioso system but don't have the requisite dough or space, the F-03A is the solution. This integrated is designed and built to the highest standards, but on a smaller scale. Though its power output of 30Wpc (60Wpc into 4 ohms) is modest, those 30W are Class A, and some of the sweetest you'll ever hear. When driving a speaker of appropriate sensitivity, the F-03A delivers the harmonic richness, transient fidelity, transparency, and musical resolution of much more expensive separates. Gorgeous casework, feel of the controls, and operation. (289)

Western Electric 91

$14,999

The 91E is a very special product. It has real innovation in design that is not hype and delivers sound quality beyond what reviewer RB had previously heard from any 300B amplifier. The areas that it excelled in redefined just how great some of the recordings he listened to were. The best sound he achieved with the 91 was on jazz and vocals. The presentation was so organic and fluid that he simply wanted to listen for hours. The only time he was not impressed was when the amp wasn't adequately warmed up—and that was his fault, not that of the equipment. If you are in the market for an integrated tube amplifier and have ever been exposed to the beautiful sound that 300Bs can offer, the 91E is a must audition. (334)

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Boulder 866

$15,500 without DAC, $17,000 with built-in DAC

While we could debate whether trickle-down economics is a thing, the 866 serves as proof that trickle-down technology is real. Beginning with the digital side, the 866 has inherited its systematic technology from Boulder's 2120 DAC. The 866 can be configured at the factory in two ways. The basic version is analog only, with three balanced XLR analog inputs. The digital version has a built-in DAC with SPDIF, TosLink, and AES/EBU inputs, as well as a Raspberry Pi/Ethernet streaming connection, so it will support Roon, Tidal, Qobuz, and other streaming sources. If you've been a fan of Boulder's sonics and build-quality, but unable to field the space for their generously sized components, the new 866 could be the component of your dreams, made into reality. (327)

Thrax Enyo

$16,750 (Optional DAC/ Streamer Board $4000 and Optional Phono Module $1875)

This all-tube, modular integrated amp from Bulgaria offers 50Wpc, and can be had with a superb optional phono section ($1875) and Roon-certified streaming DAC ($4000). The tube complement comprises an ECC88 (input), 6N6P (driver), and GU50 (output) tubes. The Enyo is built with expensive parts and lavish casework. A 4.3" display shows the major operating parameters for navigating the layered menu system. The Enyo provides a clean, neutral sound through the line inputs with external sources, as well as through the optional phonostage and DAC. The Enyo's sound is neutral rather than classic warm and tubey. You don't hear "new" aspects of the music in the upper midrange and the highs; you just hear what is on the recording. The Thrax Enyo is a luxury product, but its quality lives up to its price. (319)

AVM CS 8.3 Black Edition

$18,995

The CS8.3 from AVM's Udo Besser is an integrated amplifier, utilizing digital switching technology for the amplification and tube topology for the linestage, coupled with an integrated streamer, all in one chassis. This combination provides 500Wpc (into 4 ohms) and has ample headroom for just about any speaker. On the surface, it seems quite simple, but from a technical perspective it's quite complex to have this level of execution and convenience in one relatively small box. Happily, the sound quality is outstanding. Having this piece in the living room was a pleasure, not only from a sonic standpoint but from a simplicity standpoint. The understated cosmetics made it a good addition, and it performed with German precision, though that precision never got in the way of the music. Reviewer RB felt AVM extracted the best of tubes and solid-stage electronics, always drawing him into the music. If fewer boxes are of value to you and this unit is within budget, it is a must on the audition list. (342)

Constellation Inspiration Integrated 1.0

$19,000

The third entry in Constellation's Inspiration Series, the 100Wpc 1.0 integrated represents the firm's most affordable effort yet. Visually streamlined, it is still unmistakably Constellation with its elegant matte-finished aluminum casework and distinctive cross-drilled side panels to promote thermal efficiency. The sonic

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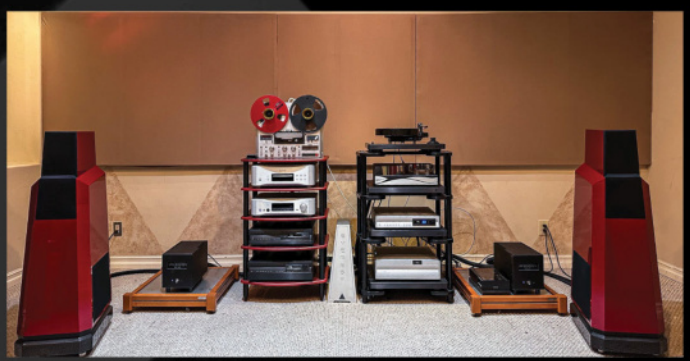

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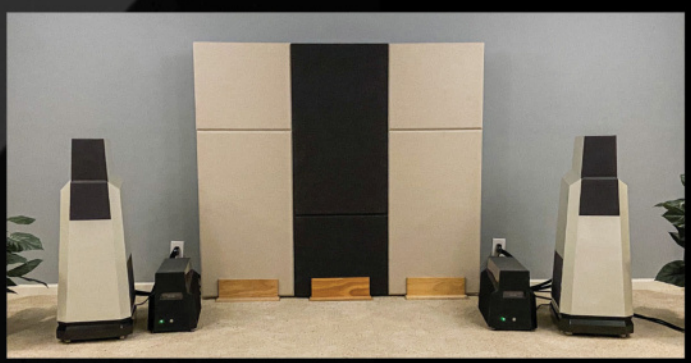

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nature of the Integrated 1.0 is that of a control amp in the most exacting and incisive sense of the words. It latches onto an audio signal with a death grip, not letting go until it reveals and resolves every sliver and shred of the program material. Its general tonal signature is ever-so-slightly shaded to the cooler side of the spectrum. Treble performance is equally exacting but open, with hints of air and sweetness and not a trace of grain. The Inspiration 1.0 is nothing short of a new high for the bottom of the Constellation line. (283)

MBL Noble N51

$21,400

The N51 packs a powerful punch with 380Wpc and key tech features designed by Jürgen Reis. While not inexpensive, the German maker's Noble electronics offer a solid middle ground that's an ideal match for MBL's superb omnidirectional speakers but should also be considered (and recommended) for use with other transducers. The N51 was a standout driving the Magnepan 30.7 planar magnetics. Not only did this pairing more than satisfy the power-hungry Maggies, the N51 also succeeded in enabling them to sing with greater effortlessness and musicality, with more robust, substantial, and three-dimensional sound—sonic results with a handful of other amps with higher ratings and/or prices didn't quite match. (287)

Soulution 330

$23,000 ($27,000 with phono)

With its 330 integrated amplifier, Soulution has succeeded in finding ways to offer a large number of its signature qualities—sonically, aesthetically, and functionally—at a fraction of the cost of its flagship 7 series and mid-tier 5-series components. As befits a classic integrated, the Soulution 330 comes standard with preamplifier and power amplifier sections (a phono board and/or DAC section are also available as separate options at additional cost). The 330 outputs 120Wpc into 8 ohms (240Wpc into 4 ohms, etc.). That might not sound like a lot, but watts can be deceiving; the 330's quality power goes a long way in both its drive capabilities across speaker loads and its superb sonics. A few of the outstanding attributes (among many) associated with Soulution components are an exceedingly low noise floor, plenty of air, and a noticeable continuity or sense of smoothness—an evenhanded ease when reproducing music. This integrated gets out of the way of the music in the right ways but delivers the right stuff. (294)

Absolare Integrated

$26,500–$34,500

This hybrid integrated combines a tube front end with a 150Wpc solid-state output stage. What makes the Integrated special is just how much it sounds like Absolare's spectacular all-tube Passion preamplifier and Passion 845 SET power amplifier. Specifically, the Integrated's midrange possesses, to a remarkable degree, the tonal lushness, rich textures, and visceral immediacy of its SET antecedent. Yet it does this while delivering the rock-solid bass and open treble extension of its transistor output. Extremely minimal in features and operation. Price range reflects options in internal parts quality. The unique and sumptuous leather-clad casework gives the Integrated a very different vibe than gear in metal boxes. (280)

Ypsilon Phaethon

$27,000

Ypsilon has brilliantly grafted the electronic DNA from its flagship Aelius monoblocks and PST100 mk2 preamp into its sole integrated amp. The result is a 110Wpc hybrid unit with only three active gain stages. Few other amps capture the earthy sense of "being there" like the Phaethon does with its ultra-wide color palette, velvety textural contrasts, micro-detailing, and fully saturated harmonics—not to mention its vise-like grip in the bass octaves. Construction is Herculean—70 heroic pounds of satin-finished aluminum and heat-sinking that would take the demigod himself to lug up Mt. Olympus. Includes a remote control, plus four inputs. (278)

Vitus Audio SIA-025

$30,000

Exemplifying the best of separates in a single, trim, and seriously hyper-massaged chassis, the 25Wpc pure Class A SIA-025 is the pinnacle of a breed never again to be underestimated. The sonic results speak for themselves—a liquid presence, a three-dimensional stage, and the finest gradations of micro-information and dynamic contrasts. If all other elements in the system chain are strong, you'll hear less system and more space—each component seems to settle and calm and in so doing achieves a wider expression, greater intimacy, and a richer vibrancy at even the lowest levels. With watts more precious than gold, calling the SIA-025 a bargain is a stretch, but after a few minutes of listening you may begin to reconsider. (218, Mk.II version not yet reviewed)

Constellation Argo

$36,500

The Argo integrated amplifier's mission is to deliver the classic Constellation sound at a lower price point. To accomplish this, Constellation's designers merged two existing Performance Series (one down from the ultimate Reference Series) components: the Virgo II preamplifier and half of a Centaur II power amp. The splicing was a solid success, as

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evidenced by the Argo's seductive-yet-propulsive, forgiving-yet-detailed sound. Timbres are beautifully complex from top to bottom. The amp has less upper-end extension, dynamic verve, and bass authority than AT's reference; yet it more than compensates with its gorgeous tone and an easygoing presentation that, nonetheless, passes along important musical details. These are the classic Constellation qualities the Argo was born to capture, and at $36,500 it is now, by far, the least expensive way to gain access to them. Note that the Argo will soon support a phonostage and a DAC card, adding to its already impressive versatility and value. (253)

CH Precision I1

$38,000–$53,000 depending on configuration

Though dubbed an integrated amplifier, CH Precision's I1 barely resembles typical members of that ilk. For one thing, the I1 is far more expensive than most of its competition; it starts at $38,000 (nicely equipped) and, like a Porsche, climbs rapidly from there as you add modules. Yet modularity allows you to configure the I1 to handle virtually any combination of digital and analog sources, streaming audio, even a moving-coil cartridge. The I1's lofty price belies its unbelievable value. Within its chassis lies the essences of CH's superb separates: the C1.2 DAC/controller ($36,000), the P1 phonostage ($31,000), and the A1.5 stereo power amp ($39,000). That's over a hundred grand of donor components, each of which is among the best in the world, in a 50 grand unit that is every bit as sonically and musically revelatory as its far more expensive stablemates. Reviewer Alan Taffel had a hard time thinking of another $50k electronics choice—integrated or separate—with the same pedigree, versatility, footprint, value proposition, and sonics. (289)

Audionet Humboldt

$58,750

The Humboldt grew out of a project to pack as much performance as possible into a single chassis. It shares much of the technology of its more costly brethren (Audionet's Stern and Heisenberg separates), offers a full feature set, and can output a whopping 320Wpc into 8 ohms. The Humboldt delivers a bottomless noise floor that lets the music breath and supreme dynamic prowess, conveying music with passion, soul, and energy. The sense of rhythm and pace are extraordinary, and the extremely low noise floor confers a sense of see-through clarity and transparency that renders tone colors more vivid and alive. Extreme bottom-end grip is not quite as convincing as state-of-the-art separates. (316)

VAC Statement 450i iQ

$150,000

There is no mistaking the pristine, precise sound of the 225Wpc all-tube VAC Statement 450i iQ integrated amp (with built-in linestage and phonostage) for the sound of your father's tube integrated. Here is no hint of conventional "tube" sound—no fat, thick, stodgy bottom end, no inflated images, no overly ripe tone or texture, no loss of upper register detail, no rolled-off treble. In fact, when it comes to attributes like resolution, focus, timbral accuracy, dynamic expression, and extension, the Statement 450i iQ integrated executes on a level comparable with the very best solid-state. Yet it offers all the magical qualities of valves—those densely colored soundscapes, dripping with texture, and populated with accurately sized, shaped, and located images, and a visceral, three-dimensional stage. (305)

EXPERT ADVICE PREAMPLIFIERS

A preamplifier receives signals from source components, allows you to select one of those sources for listening, and controls the volume.

Some preamplifiers include additional inputs and features:

- Integral phonostage (necessary if you intend to play LPs).
- Integral streaming for listening to music from a subscription service such as Tidal or Qobuz.
- Integral digital-to-analog converter; converts a digital datastream to analog from streaming source or an external digital source such as a music server.
- Roon compatibility.
- Remote control.
- Theater bypass: this feature sets one of the preamplifier's inputs at a fixed gain ("unity gain") when using the preamplifier as part of a multichannel home-theater system.
- Headphone amplifier.

PREAMPLIFIERS

Schiit Audio Magnius

$199

The reason that audiophiles pass over modestly priced components for higher-priced options is often the "grayness" or perceived lack of resolution and detail of budget gear. There simply isn't enough there there, for an experienced audiophile. That was not an issue with the Schiit Magnius preamplifier and headphone amplifier. Power-supply tweakers be warned—the Magnius requires its own AC-to-AC, 1.5-to-2 amp, 14-to-16-volt power supply, instead of a more usual AC-to-DC type. The Magnius' soundstage characteristics, including depth, image precision, width, and dimensionality, were exactly what reviewer Steven Stone expected from reference-level component, regardless of

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price. If you can live with just two inputs, the Magnius may well be all you really need. (311)

Schiit Audio Freya+

$849 ($899, Black)

The Freya+ is a tube-based preamplifier with three output modes: passive, differential solid-state buffering for balanced outputs, and differential tube for that sweet, syrupy tube sound. The tube stage is surprisingly quiet and adds just enough of that heavy magic. There are five inputs, two balanced and three unbalanced, along with one balanced output and two unbalanced outputs. The Freya+ generally sounded best in the tube mode, though the solid-state buffer was no slouch. Mids were particularly focused and sweet, while bass remained tight and impactful. Overall, a flexible and solid preamp choice. (309)

Audio by Van Alstine Transcendence 10RB

$1199

The Transcendence 10 RB vacuum-tube preamp sample that reviewer Drew Kalbach received had the Vision phono circuit included, which sounded fantastic. He was instantly impressed by the depth of the soundstage and the general dynamics. Indeed, whenever he took the AVA Transcendence 10RB out of the system, he ended up putting it right back in. Includes remote control. Like its companion piece, the Vision SET amp, the Transcendence 10RB is the best bargain DK has reviewed. (290)

NuPrime AMG PRA

$1895

The AMG PRA is a compact box with two knobs on the front and an LED indicator for channel and volume. The left knob controls the loudness-compensation feature, and the right knob switches between standby mode, line inputs, and adjusts volume. On the back, the STA includes one set of balanced inputs and three unbalanced RCAs along with a balanced and unbalanced RCA out. The STA's deep and quiet noise floor allows music to absolutely shine with crispness and dynamism. Its flexibility would work well in multiple setups, and its near-transparent sound could slot in with most equipment. Sounds particularly good with the NuPrime AMG STA. (319)

Atma-Sphere UV-1

$2100 ($2500 w/mm phono section; $2990 w/mc phono section)

Intended as a cost-effective entry-level component, in its basic form as a line preamp, the UV-1 uses a single 6SN7 dual triode per channel. The line section delivers on the promise of the 6SN7 with a big tone, authoritative midrange, and excellent spatial detail. Sonically, the UV-1 occupies the middle ground between vintage and modern tube sound. It abandons absolute neutrality in favor of a bold and assertive midrange replete with wonderful tonal color saturation. Deserves a serious listen when shopping around at the under-$3k price point. (258)

Benchmark Media Systems LA4

$2950 (remote control option $100)

The LA4, a fully analog linestage, comes closer to measured and measurable perfection than any audio product in any category that Paul Seydor has ever reviewed, owned, or heard. It has lower distortion and noise (close to Johnson level, i.e., the residual thermal noise inherent in all electronic circuits at equilibrium) than any other electronic component in his experience, its transparency and tonal neutrality unsurpassed and probably unequaled as well. Its dynamic range is likewise at the highest state of the art. An amazing 256-step volume control maintains 0.5dB/step resolution and flawless channel-to-channel tracking at any setting throughout its range. With no discernible sonic characteristics that he can identify, it is PS's new reference standard for a linestage. (311)

Rogue Audio RP-5/RP-7

$3495/$4995

Combining classic vacuum-tube heritage with micro-processor control is Rogue's recipe for one satisfying and affordable preamp. The RP-5 brings its magic to bear in the areas of color saturation and tonal liquidity, presenting a natural acoustic clarity that rings truthful. It establishes an authentic sense of dimension and spaciousness specific to each image. The treble is nicely extended, quick, detailed, and abundant with harmonic information. Bass performance is authoritative, controlled, and yet also somewhat warm and bloomy. The RP-5 is a prime example of what the high end is all about—music reproduced accurately and beautifully. The RP-7 is the balanced version of the RP-5, and like a family member that attended finishing school it takes the musical voice of the RP-5 and burnishes it in areas that were already very, very good. Perhaps most persuasively, there is also a new solidity and control in the bass and lower midrange, which more confidently anchors all kinds of music from a rock band to an orchestra. A significant upgrade over the excellent RP-5. (260, 283)

Anthem STR

$4300

The STR preamplifier delivers on two high-end electronics parameters at which Anthem has always excelled, the user interface and DSP room correction. Navigation of the STR's layers of operational menus, displayed on a readable-from-across-the room, thin-film-resistor display, is intuitive and readily mastered. The latest (Genesis) version of ARC gives the user an

almost limitless capacity to address quirks of real-life listening environments, the software employing two dozen IIR filters per channel and operating at 192kHz. A premium AKM DAC chip performs both 32-bit/384kHz PCM as well as 2.8 and 5.6MHz DSD processing (though be advised that the latter is via DoP rather than "native" DSD transmission, if this matters to you.) There's a phonostage with four selectable equalization curves other than the standard RIAA, and the preamp has an analog bypass option. (298)

AGD Alto

$4999

All of the thrills, with none of the frills (well, almost none, there is a remote). This analog preamp has magnificent sound and is designed to interface perfectly with any of AGD's GaN-based power amps. The circuitry is fully balanced and DC coupled, with one set of XLR inputs and outputs. There are two other pairs of RCA line inputs, RCA mm or mc phono, and two RCA outputs. Quite petite in the Italian style (though it is made in the USA), it has a vintage understated look. As a purist design (even volume is handled by a passive ladder control), it has very little sound of its own, allowing the beauty, the quickness, the passion, and all the details of a multitude of musical styles to pass through *brillantemente*. (338)

Cambridge Edge NQ

$5000

For its 50th anniversary, Cambridge Audio didn't go the conservative route with the Edge NQ network preamplifier. An analog preamplifier with built-in network player and DAC, the NQ is the place to connect all the connected aspects of your musical life. The triumph here is in the simplicity and reliability of the hardware and software integration. Switching among YouTube-sourced music videos on the iPad, Chromecasted Qobuz streamed music, or computer playback of music files from a NAS is embarrassingly easy and immediate to execute. When he reviewed it together with the Edge W power amplifier, AM found the best pure audio performance to be had through the NQ's analog preamplifier or DAC inputs. The sonic result (given all the complexity inside the beautiful box) is unexpectedly hear-through, making exploration of the ever-expanding world of musical possibilities better. (301)

Audible Illusions L3B

$5295

A purist design based on a single, Russian 6H23n-EB triode per channel, the L3A distills the best attributes of modern tube sound: precise transients, a detailed presentation, and natural yet non-euphonic textures. It is its insistence on the sonic truth that defines it as a true reference line preamp. The L3A's ability to retrieve the music's rhythmic drive and drama makes it one of the most sonically persuasive line preamps on the market. Audible Illusions' best effort to date and one of the best line preamps DO has auditioned over the years at any price: audible illusions on a grand scale! (259)

PrimaLuna EVO 400

$5295

The EVO 400 represents an evolutionary upgrade from the Dialogue Premium preamp. The most significant new feature is balanced connectivity implemented using mu-metal-shielded quadfilar line transformers. Sonically, the EVO delivers tonal weight without sacrificing speed and detail. Transients are negotiated with admirable speed and control. And there's not much to complain about at the frequency extremes. The treble range is sweet and detailed without gratuitous brightness, while the bass range features excellent pitch definition and timing. Its feel for microdynamic nuances and ability to scale the macrodynamic range from soft to loud captures much of the music's dramatic content. The EVO 400 is not only PrimaLuna's best line preamp offering ever, but also holds its own against ultra-high-end competition. Miraculously, it manages to combine the virtues of modern tube sound with the tonal heft and timbral realism of vintage tube preamps. (305)

Bryston BR-20

$5995

The Bryston BR-20 is one of the most successful mergers of a solid-state analog preamp with DAC and built-in streaming available today. A model of preamp ergonomics, operationally it proved to be glitch free and a pleasure to use. It is also an honest broker in terms of tonal accuracy, hewing to the straight and narrow with a "just the facts ma'am" musical frankness. The BR-20 was also superbly quiet, opening a window to the lowest level details and eliciting bass response that had a combination of grip and authority that are the hallmarks of the best preamps of this type. Since the BR-20 unwaveringly reproduces what's actually on the recording, those who might prefer a little added sweet frosting will find it stubbornly neutral. A superb headphone output comes standard. Tempting options include an HDMI board and a phonostage. It operates effectively via its web user-interface, but a handy aluminum remote control is also included. (323)

Aesthetix Calypso/Janus Signature

$6000 (Calypso Signature, $8500)/Janus, $9000 (Janus Signature, $13,000)

The stalwart Calypso linestage and new Janus Signature (which includes a Rhea Signature phonostage) share numerous qualities: speed and detail; highs without a glint of shrillness; a low noise floor; precise rhythms; dynamics that are only a skosh less lively than reference-caliber; and a

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laid-back perspective. The quiet background and smooth treble add up to long hours of glorious, fatigue-free listening. As for differences, the normal Calypso/Janus soundstage is big, but not huge, while the Signature soundstage is fully realized. The Signature also delivers a richer portfolio of instrumental timbres, more air, longer decays, and better-defined bass. However, these are accompanied by an upper-bass bump that adds a warmth and thickness that affects both timing and timbre. The choice between the Signature and non-Signature model will come down to personal preference, though, at $6000, the original Calypso remains a steal. (196)

Pass Labs XP-12

$6100

The XP-12 line-level preamp forgoes the dual-chassis extravagance of its uptown siblings, but sonically you wouldn't know it. Musical naturalness abounds, with stunning orchestral layering and complex three-dimensional soundspaces. There's a level of harmonic bloom across the entire spectrum—most notably the infusion of resonance and decay cues around strings and winds—that results in a musically juicier quality of such ripeness it might make you reach for a napkin. Anchored by the precision of Wayne Colburn's single-stage electronic volume control (from the company's flagship Xs line), the XP-12 produces an almost eerie sense of music bursting forth in the here and now, rather than being extracted from a recording. (286)

Chord Electronics Ultima Pre 3

$8495

The Ultima 3 replaces the company's popular and long-running CPA3000. It offers two balanced pairs of inputs, and three unbalanced inputs, one balanced AV bypass input, and a pair of balanced and unbalanced outputs. This generous complement of inputs and outputs is housed in lavish and innovative casework that sets it apart from that traditional rectangular box. The Ultima 3 is a very neutral-sounding component that's revealing and uncompromising—it faithfully delivers what's on the recording. The treble has excellent extension and definition, with cymbals having natural-sounding percussive strike followed by a natural decay, adding to the sense of realism. (339)

McIntosh Labs C53

$8500

A standing rebuke to the folly of minimalism and the snobbishness of those who insist that only separates can scale the peaks of audio artistry, McIntosh's C53 preamplifier replaces a whole shelf-full of components, rolling a state-of-the-art linestage, phonostage, DAC, equalizer, and headphone amp into a single elegant, albeit large box, with no compromises in performance. With 16 inputs and three outputs, the C53's connectivity is unrivaled, its DAC supporting every popular digital format (including all DSD and PCM hi-res formats, excepting MQA), plus an ARC HDMI input that *correctly* decodes and mixes down movie and TV sources for those who demand first-class AV reproduction through their two-channel setups. Its two phonostages, one each for mm and mc, with loading and capacitance options that will match almost every pickup out there, are good enough to obviate the need for separates. In addition to all this, the C53 offers battleship construction and looks that just radiate class, taste, and timeless style. One of PS's reference preamplifiers. (315)

Pass Labs XP-22

$9975

The XP-22 preamplifier is a two-box affair, with a dual-mono power supply connected to the control module by a supplied 9-pin JAE umbilical cable. Designed by Nelson Pass's long-time engineering partner, Wayne Colburn, the XP-22 features an improved volume control—Colburn's specialty—that is quieter and more accurate than previous versions. There are five sets of stereo inputs (two XLR and three RCA), including one with unity gain intended for a home-theater application. Three pairs of outputs are provided, one balanced and two unbalanced. The XP-22 is a supremely quiet component and, as a result, it reveals musically important detail very well. The preamp imposes no apparent colorations of its own on source material and dynamics are unrestrained. (316)

Classé Delta PRE

$9999

Classé's newest stereo preamplifier features a sophisticated yet intuitive touchscreen GUI that facilitates navigation of the component's vast functional capabilities. The Delta PRE has its own excellent DAC (an AKM 4497 chipset that supports native DSD) and a phonostage that allows for the choice of cartridge type and impedance loading in seconds. The analog-domain stepped attenuator has 400 steps: You can definitely be confident of finding the right volume setting. The preamp doesn't have automated DSP room correction, but instead offers advanced parametric EQ capabilities. Even without such wizardry, however, Classé's Delta PRE is as transparent and uncolored as the best. (312)

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Yamaha C-5000

$9999

Yamaha put some heart and soul into its return to the audio deep end. While the NS-5000 speakers and GT-5000 turntable are likely to attract most of the 5000 Series attention, the C-5000 preamplifier is an impressive component deserving of its own spotlight. This fully balanced, solid-state preamp incorporates a wonderful, fully discrete phonostage with a massive 80dB of potential gain. There's a feeling of a signal unimpeded. The C-5000 doesn't require a sonic counterbalance elsewhere in the system. It also happens to be one of the most rewarding components to just put your hands on and use. The controls have a rare delicate precision which encourages you to skip using the remote (and get some likely needed exercise in the process). An interesting and unique option in high-end preamplifiers, especially if a turntable is an important part of your system. (308)

Mark Levinson N°5206

$11,000

Part of the more affordable (for Mark Levinson) 5000 Series, the N° 5206 sports a host of advanced circuits and features. The dual-monaural signal path is direct coupled and pure Class A in operation. The audio path features a single gain stage mated to a digitally controlled resistor-ladder volume control. The N° 5206 is fitted with an integral DAC with MQA decoding and rendering and Bluetooth connectivity; the unit can handle PCM up to 384kHz/24-bit as well as DSD up to 11.2MHz. The N° 5206 even includes a headphone jack with enough current drive to power any 'phones. The icing on the cake is an outstanding mm/mc phonostage featuring a hybrid gain technology with an infrasonic filter and unusually comprehensive cartridge-loading adjustment. The preamp is superb with low-level passages, with resolution limited only by the source, not by the preamplifier itself. (322)

VTL TL-5.5 Series II Signature

$12,000 ($15,500 with phono)

Initially introduced in 1997, the VTL TL-5.5 Series II Signature preamp has been seriously improved using technologies found in the company's flagship TL-7.5 Reference Series III ($35,000) and TL-6.5 Signature Series II ($22,500). Another difference between VTL's top three models is that the 6.5 and 7.5 are hybrid designs employing FET buffers, whereas the 5.5 shares the same basic circuit topologies but uses tube buffers, making the 5.5 Signature II VTL's top all-tube model. The 5.5 II's features, accessed via front panel or remote, allow users to select from eight inputs, engage an external processor, choose mono mode, and control phase as well as balance and, of course, volume. Like VTL's ST-150 power amp, the 5.5 II is an exceptionally musical preamp, with wonderful resolution, excellent dynamic shading, and the warmth, air, and texture of the best tube designs, but without the overtly colored sound that plagues some models. (251)

Constellation Inspiration Preamp 1.0

$14,500

This trickle-down product from Constellation's $99k Altair preamplifier brings you much of the Constellation sound for a fraction of the price. Using the same schematic (and even the same audio circuit-board layout) as the Altair, the Inspiration 1.0 delivers the signature Constellation sound of high resolution, an airy and spacious soundstage, and a complete absence of hardness and glare. The savings were realized with a less expensive implementation of the Altair's circuit, along with less extravagant casework. (249)

Zanden Audio Model 3100

$14,500

This gorgeously built, relatively demure linestage is a virtual sonic clone of its companion piece—Zanden's extraordinary 8120 stereo amplifier. With its all-tube output stage, all-tube rectification, a fixed-bias, current-regulated power supply, and transformer-coupled outputs, you might expect the 3100 to sound classically "tube-y." But as is the case with Zanden's power amplifier, you would be entirely wrong. JV has not heard an all-tube linestage that outdoes this one in speed, resolution, soundstaging, and grip. Sounding like a top-tier solid-state linestage (only with added lifelike bloom, air, and dimensionality), this little Zanden is a genuine "find"—a tube preamp with almost all the virtues and none of the shortfalls of solid-state. A reference-quality unit. (243)

Brinkmann Audio Marconi MKII

$14,990

When contrasted with much more expensive equipment from CH Precision, Boulder, and Ypsilon, the Brinkmann preamplifier doesn't quite have their magnanimity of sound, grip, and airiness. CH Precision produces a cavernous black space that seems unrivaled. Boulder has a degree of control that is unique to it. And Ypsilon lights up the soundstage. But Brinkmann comes remarkably close and has its own set of virtues. It has a dynamism and smooth continuity that are immensely beguiling. It represents formidable German engineering allied to a profound sense of musicality that will be difficult for most listeners to resist. (301)

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- Marc Phillips, Part Time Audiophile

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MBL N11

$17,700

The N11 is a solid-state preamplifier that doesn't sound particularly solid-state. Oh, it has the grip of transistors in the bottom octaves, but it also has some of the three-dimensional roundness and a good deal of the timbral richness of tubes in the midrange, and not a jot of solid-state brightness or edginess in the treble. Highly detailed, a little dark, a little soft and sweet on top but always enjoyable, powerful, and musical, and, given the right source and pairing, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and a soundfield of head-slapping breadth, width, and depth, the N11 (like its Noble Line companion, the N15 monoblock amplifier) is a component JV can confidently recommend to every kind of listener. (287)

T+A P3100HV

$22,350

The relaxed—nay, effortless—control of the balanced P3110 HV preamplifier allows it to deliver a burnished sound and a capacious soundstage. A marvel of Teutonic engineering, it contains a parametric equalizer, a phono section, and separate analog and digital power supplies. The velvety sound of this preamplifier is its most distinguishing characteristic, permitting it to render the sonority of acoustic instruments with great fidelity. For all its ease of presentation, the P3100 HV does not stint on detail or transparency. Its combination of bliss and luxury, command and control, suggest that it is one of the finest preamplifiers extant. (316)

VTL TL-6.5 Series II Signature

$22,500

The TL6.5 Series II Signature preamplifier is a significantly updated version of VTL's TL6.5 Signature preamplifier. The VTL design team's goal for the Series II was to incorporate most of the advanced technology found in the company's flagship preamplifier, the TL7.5 Series III Reference—a hybrid, two-chassis (separate power supply) model—in a single chassis. The application of this advanced technology has certainly improved sonics (and ergonomics). One of the things WG kept marveling at listening to the latest incarnation of VTL gear was the extraordinary sense of balance and overall harmony, of the interplay between musicians. Musically natural and measurably superior, the TL-6.5 Series II maximizes all that tubes do well, while minimizing their shortcomings. (305)

Audionet Pre G2

$23,350

With the Pre G2's rated bandwidth of 0Hz–2MHz (–3dB) and a signal-to-noise ratio greater than 120dB, Audionet claims to offer best-of-class measurements. Add in thoughtful features like 18dB of user-adjustable gain per input for level-matching and the ability to label each source, and the Pre G2 is as functionally versatile as it is sonically accomplished. Characterized by exceptional transparency and resolution, it is one of the most organic and natural-sounding solid-state linestages around. It plays music from any source with impeccable linearity, sophisticated finesse, and spot-on tonality, delivering exquisitely and accurately scaled dynamics at any volume level. (279)

Boulder 1110

$24,000

Boulder's 1110 is loaded with sophisticated features including five programmable balanced inputs, extensive set-up options, IP addressability, and automatic software updates. All this

is made possible by a powerful on-board computer. The advanced volume control is derived from Boulder's more expensive 3000 series. The 1110's sonics are traditional Boulder, with a powerful bottom end, exceptional resolution of low-level information, and particularly outstanding dynamic performance, which reveals the musical life in a recording. The soundstage is wide and lifelike at no penalty in energy. It all adds up to perhaps the best value in Boulder's long history. Note that the 1110 has balanced inputs and outputs only. (287)

Constellation Pictor

$24,500

All three models in Constellation's Revelation series (Pictor preamp, Andromeda phonostage, and Taurus monoblock power amp) offer high technical capability in service to music playback. Sonic compromises such as accurate-but-analytical, silky-but-smeared, musical-but-veiled simply don't apply. You get it all: lifelike tonal balance, refined resolution, expansive soundstaging, fantastic dynamic range and control—in a compelling musical whole. While the Pictor doesn't have the body and liquidity of tubes, it still delivers remarkable levels of continuousness, image heft, and tonal density. The usual underlying electronic noise and transient dynamic instability are so well mitigated that the listener simply perceives more musical content with greater accuracy and ease. (294)

Absolare Passion

$27,500 ($31,000, Signature)

This ultra-minimalist single-ended triode preamplifier is about as tweaky as a preamplifier gets, with an extremely simple signal path, just four unbalanced inputs, no remote control, and two unmarked front-panel knobs (volume and input selec-

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tion). The circuit is built using cost-no-object parts and housed in a massive aluminum chassis clad in leather. Sonically, the Passion is very much like the companion Passion 845 power amplifiers, with a complete lack of grain and solid-state glare overlying timbres. The treble is just a little on the forgiving side, a quality that complements the tendency toward brightness of some dome tweeters. Soundstaging is phenomenal—wide, deep, transparent, and three-dimensional. The Passion is immensely communicative of musical expression. (234)

Soulution 525

$28,000

Until the arrival of the Soulution 700 Series preamp, JV had never heard a better solid-state preamplifier that this little gem from Switzerland, now in an improved 525 version. (Only 2012's POY-winner, the Constellation Virgo, competed on a near-equal footing.) Not only does the 525 have all the things you would expect from world-class solid-state—jaw-dropping transient speed, outstanding low-level resolution, tremendous grip in the bass, vanishingly low noise and coloration, but like its companion pieces, the 501 monoblock amplifiers, it joins these qualities with a gorgeous, newfound density of tone color that makes every kind of music sound not just lively and detailed but also beautiful and that much more realistic. When you add one of the best built-in phonostages JV has heard in a single-box solid-state unit (the 525 is that rarity in latter-day components—a full-function preamplifier), you get a genuine reference-level product and TAS' 2013 Solid-State Preamplifier of the Year. (236)

Zanden 3000mk2

$28,500

The all-glass-powered Zanden Classic trio (2000mk2 linestage, 1200mk3 phonostage, and 9600mk2 monoblock power amplifier) will get you where you want to go—i.e., the sound of the real thing—without forcing you to pay a heavy toll in listenability on less-than-SuperDisc recordings. This consistent listenability is one of the Zanden Classic suite's sonic virtues. It is not a typical overlay of tubeyness; indeed, for tube gear the Zanden 2000mk2 sounds remarkably precise. It is focused, grain-free, and a little Class A "dark" in timbre, without any bottom-end plumminess. Indeed, the bass of the Zanden 2000mk2 (particularly in combination

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with its sister phonostage and brother power amp) is truly superb—richly (and accurately) colored, three-dimensional, bloomy, clear-as-solid-state in pitch, near transistor-quick and powerful on transients, and immensely detailed in performance cues. A TAS Product of the Year-worthy product. (293)

Lamm Industries L2.1 Reference

$28,990

This two-chassis affair, with an outboard power supply, is a hybrid design but not in the usual sense. The power supply is all tube, while the audio circuit is solid-state. The musical message is presented without any tonal accents. Its inherent sound is texturally pure, with only a slight suggestion of second-order harmonics. The music's full complement of drama is on display as the L2.1 always seems to squeeze a bit more energy from each recording. The remarkably low noise floor enables exemplary resolution of track fadeouts and reverberant decay. In general, the spatial impression is quite convincing with excellent image focus and depth perspective, though the extent of soundstage layering is dependent on the associated power amp. The L2.1 Reference belongs to a select club of line preamps that are capable of serving up an edgeless organic whole. It is a true Reference in the best sense of the word. (278)

MBL 6010D

$32,400

It's been around for decades, but like everything else that Jürgen Reis has designed, the 6010D was and is so far "ahead of the curve"—technically and sonically—that all but a few other supremely gifted audio engineers are still playing catch-up. Not only does the thing measure flawlessly; its sound (with the typical MBL rich, beautiful, bottom-up tonal palette) is also impeccable. Fast on transients without brightness or edginess, immensely detailed without verging on the analytical, finely focused without exacting a price in three-dimensionality, very deep-reaching and defined in the bass without incurring the typical solid-state losses of air, volume, and bloom, it is an extremely enjoyable, well-balanced, and natural-sounding preamplifier, whose only genuine competition costs many tens of thousands of dollars more. For the money, the 6010D is hard to beat. One of JV's references. (Forthcoming)

CH Precision L1

$34,500 ($51,500 w/X1 power supply; $92,000 dual-mono configuration with two X1 power supplies)

Like its companion piece, the CH Precision M1 monoblock amplifier, this exceptional, dual-monaural, ultra-low-noise, ultra-high-bandwidth, fully balanced line-level preamplifier is a contender for "Best in Solid-State." Designed by the Swiss team at CH Precision, the L1 is a model of timbral beauty, high transient speed, high (actually, highest) detail, precision (though not razor-cut) imaging, and wall-to-wall soundstaging. Whether it's the lowering of resonance via CH's custom mechanical damping or the expanded bandwidth and superior speed of the L1's high-speed Class A circuitry, this preamp (like the Soulution 725) has none of the odd-order-harmonic edginess that drives audiophiles to drink (and to tubes). It is one very smooth, sophisticated customer, and yet it doesn't overly smooth sonics, turning them dull, gray, or antiseptic. On the contrary, timbre is rich and dynamics eye-popping. (259)

Pass Labs Xs

$38,000

An all-out challenge to the state of the art and every other preamp available. Pass Labs' Wayne Colburn and Nelson Pass have truly outdone themselves in producing this massive two-unit preamp. It does everything right in every aspect of sound quality, and is so revealing of musical and soundstage detail, that you virtually have to listen to realize how good it actually is. Reviewer AHC could not find any flaws even in comparison with other top preamps, and its extraordinarily low noise floor and natural, detailed deep bass have few, if any rivals. Male and female voice were excellent, and open and natural. Complex organ passages were exceptionally clean, and so were complex orchestral dynamics, opera, recordings of large jazz bands. Good form follows functional styling, excellent features, and good ergonomics. AHC's current reference preamp. (243)

Tidal Prisma

$40,000

The solid-state Prisma preamplifier is a minimalist design taken to an extreme of execution. The innovative circuits are realized with no-compromise build-quality, particularly the elaborate, discrete-resistor stepped attenuator. The minimalist theme extends to its black polished-acrylic front panel, which includes just a volume control and a source selector—no balance control, no on/off switch (it's part of the source selector), and no display. Inputs and outputs are balanced only, including the phono input. As great as the Prisma is as a linestage, its phono section (moving coil only, with only two gain settings) is spectacular. The Prisma's unique topology reduces by nearly half the circuitry of a conventional phonostage/linestage. The result is clarity and transparency coupled with a lush timbral rendering devoid of electronic artifacts. (306)

Constellation Virgo III

$43,000

It may seem odd to call a $43k preamplifier "trickle-down," but that's exactly what the Virgo III is. The Virgo III is very similar in design and construction to Constellation's $99,000 Altair II preamplifier. Having lived with every level of Constellation

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electronics, from Inspiration to Reference, RH can report that the Virgo comes close to the Altair's performance at a lower, though still lofty, price. The Virgo has a wonderful warmth through the midrange that is reminiscent of SET designs, coupled with perhaps the best treble reproduction of any solid-state preamp save the Altair. The upper midrange through the top treble is extremely defined, resolved, open, and spacious. Moreover, it delivers these qualities without sounding etched or fatiguing—and for a fraction of the Reference Series' price. (234)

Esoteric Grandioso C1X

$46,000

Recently updated to the C1X, this sumptuous preamp's weighty control knobs are bathed in a soft blue glow that brightens when you touch them, and the speed at which you turn the volume control affects the rate of volume change. It's almost enough to make you forego the beautifully honed remote. Sonically, music pours from the C1 with uncommon smoothness and effortlessness. Dynamic emphases really pop. In keeping with the Grandioso stack's theme of purity, the C1X's sound is free of any specter of the electronic. (280)

Audionet Stern

$48,950

At 19.88" deep, the Stern is more feature rich than its predecessor (the PRE G2), starting with a 7" wide by 4½" tall high-resolution display centered on the upper half of its front face. Sonically, its purity, transparency, tone color, and especially texture are exquisite. Like its companion Heisenberg amp, the Stern simply breathes life into the audio spectrum, reproducing musicians with a remarkable sense of realism. In the midrange and lower treble, it almost seems to delight in articulating enunciation or breathing artifacts and serving up any other forms of vocalization with which it is challenged. Its ability to create a genuine sense of the body, bloom, and texture of instruments is matched only by the realism with which it reproduces transient detail and timbre. (306)

Accuphase C-3900

$50,000

Accuphase's recently updated flagship preamplifier can serve as the heart of any system. Never bright and fatiguing, neither is it soft and dull. The presentation tends to stay close to the sonic groove that provides long-term listening pleasure, with enough resolution, warmth, and soul to allow full exploration of the music being presented. Having multiple inputs and configuration options, the C-3850 should be at home in most systems, while performing to a high level of satisfaction. (272)

Soulution 727

€55,000 (€9500 phono card)

Writing about the Soulution 725 linestage, JV said: "If you want to know what an LP, reel-to-reel tape, or digital file is capable of in the way of detail, power, color, and pure excitement, I don't think there is another single-unit solid-state preamplifier that can outdo the sonics of this Swiss masterpiece from the boys in Dulliken." Exceptionally high in resolution, gorgeously dark and rich in tone color (with genuinely tube-like three-dimensional imaging), unexceeded (for a transistor unit) in soundstage width and depth, and rivaled in transient speed only by certain Constellation and CH Precision products, this (Swiss) cheese stood alone when it came to the bottom octaves, to which it brought a power, weight, density of color, and dimensionality that were truly lifelike. And now, the best (or one of them) has been made even better with Soulution's new 727 linestage. Noise has been reduced by approximately 20dB; bandwidth pushed to 20MHz, thus reducing phase errors in the audio band; common mode rejection increased by 20dB; channel separation increased by 30dB; and already vanishingly low distortion made immeasurable. The result: a world-class preamp is now audibly improved—much higher in resolution top to bottom (without any loss of Soulution's remarkable dimensionality), deeper and wider in soundstaging, more extended, powerful, and exciting (without any loss in tape-like smoothness on big dynamic shifts), devoid of noise (jet-black silences), and just plain thrilling to listen to. JV's new reference and one of his nominees for 2023 Product of the Year. (Forthcoming)

darTZeel NHB-18NS

$61,000

The battery-powered darTZeel preamplifier aims to provide a silkily quiet background, and it does. With a variety of options, including numerous BNC outputs and inputs, for connecting to front-end equipment and amplifiers, it functions as something of the proverbial Swiss Army knife. A nifty feature is the inclusion, once a common feature in the audio industry, of a phonostage whose performance is nothing to be sneezed at. The darTZeel believes in the lush life. It delicately and convincingly treads the fine line between tubes and solid-state to produce highs that possess a rare purity, seemingly devoid of any electronic artifacts that plague lesser gear. While the bass reproduction may not be quite as stentorian as some of its competitors

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such as Boulder or Gryphon, the darTZeel possesses an ability to reproduce microdetail that may be unsurpassed. (327)

Gryphon Commander

$67,000 (preamp: $38,000, power supply $29,000)

This Danish preamplifier more than merits its audacious name. No detail is too minute for it to reproduce with utter clarity and control. Add in prodigious grip in the bass region, image solidity, and seemingly effortless dynamic swells, and the Commander pretty much sails through the most demanding passages with ease. Nothing seems to faze it. In this regard, the Commander makes a powerful case for overkill—four custom 36VA toroidal transformers, for example, inhabit the 84-pound power supply. That kind of bulk means that the preamp plays with *sang-froid*, where its coevals might start to exhibit some symptoms of sonic distress. Black backgrounds are a given with the Commander. But they are accompanied by a silky sound that ensures that the Gryphon cannot even remotely be accused of producing the dry sound often associated with solid-state gear. An enticing mix of beauty and the beast, the Commander could hardly be a more winning preamplifier—or worthy recipient of our Product of the Year Award. (334)

Boulder 2110

$76,000

Boulder's 2110 preamplifier is a technological tour de force. It comprises four modules, two for the power supply and two for the linestage, that help to ensure amazing image stability, subterranean bass, and gossamer-like highs. Timbres have tremendous weight and heft, coupled with a delicious pellucidity that sets it apart from other preamps. Its fully balanced operation banishes any hint of hum. Nothing extraneous ever seems to intrude upon the music as the 2110 delivers transient attacks with unerring accuracy and effortlessness. The 2110 may lack the final degree of fluidity conferred by tubes, but its low noise floor, mellifluous tonality, and stupendous control mean that it resides at the peak of solid-state designs. (249)

CH Precision L10

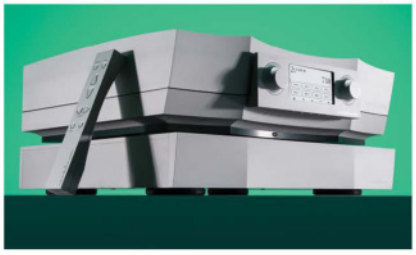
$76,000 (two-chassis L10), $132,000 (four-chassis dual-mono configuration)

CH Precision's L10 preamplifier is the highest realization of the Swiss company's technology, build-quality, and musical aesthetic. It combines unprecedented set-up flexibility and control with simply stunning sound quality. Sonically, the 10 Series has a pristine rendering and exquisite resolution of fine detail without sounding analytical. The highly detailed rendering for which CH Precision is known is there, but accompanied by body, timbral warmth, and dense tone color—a compelling combination. These electronics let you hear every nuance of musical expression and interaction between musicians in a way that is simply thrilling. A *tour de force* in amplification and RH's reference linestage. (323)

VAC Statement

$80,000

A lot of tube-electronics manufacturers make outlandish claims about their linestages' immunity to noise, hum, and resonance—the bugbears of valve electronics. The difference here is that VAC's Statement Line Stage really is dead quiet. Whether it's the heroic efforts that VAC's designer Kevin Hayes has gone to in the construction of the Statement's twin (one for electronics, one for power supply) chassis—machined at VAC from high-grade, non-ferrous aluminum and processed through a series of plating steps to provide superior RF rejection across a wide range of radio frequencies—or the way the circuits are laid out in distinct isolated sections to prevent unwanted interactions, the VAC Statement Line Stage has the quietest "backgrounds" JV has yet heard in a tube unit. As a direct result, timbre, resolution, dimensionality, transient response, imaging, and soundstaging are electrifyingly and gorgeously lifelike. JV has yet to hear a richer, more beautiful, more detailed, or more exciting tube preamp—and, unlike many competitors, the Statement's got great grip in the bass and full extension in the treble, too. (263)



Constellation Altair II

$99,000

The Altair II is nothing short of an all-out assault on the state of the art in preamplifier design. Its two-chassis design separates the power supply from the audio circuits. The performance can be taken up another level with the addition of the DC Filter, a power-supply-sized box that further purifies the DC feeding the audio circuits. The design is unprecedented in many respects, including extraordinary measures to isolate the audio circuits from vibration and noise. The gain stages are suspended on a floating "raft" within a sub-chamber of the massive clamshell chassis, machined from two solid aluminum blocks. The Altair II sets new standards in transparency, resolution, absence of grain, and sheer realism, in RH's experience. Although highly resolving, it is anything but etched or clinical. Rather, it comes as close to a colorless window on the music as RH has experienced. This newer version has a front-panel touchscreen and a pair of knobs. Surprisingly, it also has even better sound than the original. (260)

Boulder 3010

$158,000

With its wealth of controls, the two-box solid-state 3010 looks like it belongs in a NORAD control center. Boulder does

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nothing by half-measures: a new dual-phase 993SD gain stage and separate power supplies for each channel ensure that it is both dead quiet and can supply crushing fortissimos with ease. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Boulder is that it comes very close to the proverbial straight wire with gain that so many audiophiles lust after. Turn the volume dial up and the soundstage simply expands without the slightest sense of compression. It would be hard to think of a more linear preamplifier than the Boulder. Those seeking tube-like bliss should look elsewhere. But for anyone enamored of a refined presentation, amazing transient detail, and seemingly limitless power, this is it. (306)

EXPERT ADVICE PHONOSTAGES

- A phonostage amplifies the tiny signal produced by the phono cartridge and performs RIAA equalization.
- RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) is an equalization curve applied during disc mastering that attenuates the bass and boosts the treble. On playback, the phonostage applies the inverse equalization curve to restore flat response.
- Phonostages are referred to as "mm" (moving magnet) or "mc" (moving coil), indicating the type of phono cartridge the phonostage is compatible with.
- An important phonostage specification is the amount of gain, or amplification.

Phonostage Features

- Variable gain. Some phonostages offer only one or two gain settings; others provide much finer gain adjustment and a wider range of gain that allow you to optimize the phonostage for your particular cartridge (see below).
- Variable loading. Loading is the impedance and capacitance the phono cartridge "sees" when driving the phonostage. The amount of load, measured in ohms of resistance and picofarads of capacitance, has a significant effect on the cartridge's frequency response. A wide choice of loading options allows you to fine-tune the tonal balance.
- Moving-coil cartridges are nearly immune to capacitance loading but are very sensitive to load impedance.
- Multiple inputs. If you have a turntable with two tonearms, you'll need a phonostage with multiple inputs.
- Transformer input. Some higher-end phonostages employ a step-up transformer at the input that boosts a moving-coil's output voltage to a higher value before amplification, improving the signal-to-noise ratio.
- Tubes and transistors. Some phonostages are built around vacuum tubes rather than transistors.
- A type of phonostage, called a transimpedance (or current-mode) phonostage, amplifies the cartridge's current output rather than its voltage. This type is gaining popularity recently. This type of phonostage requires a cartridge with a very low internal impedance. There is no need for cartridge loading with a transimpedance phonostage.

Matching Phonostage Gain to a Cartridge

- Phono cartridges vary widely in their output levels. To realize optimum performance, phonostage gain must be matched to the cartridge's output voltage.
- A moving-magnet cartridge typically requires about 45dB of gain.
- A moving-coil cartridge typically requires about 55–68dB of gain.
- Insufficient gain in the phonostage results in poor signal-to-noise ratio and requires you to turn up the preamplifier volume near its maximum.
- Too much gain and the sound will be too loud with the preamplifier's volume control barely turned up. Excessive gain for a particular cartridge can also result in distortion if the phonostage is overloaded by the cartridge's output voltage.

PHONOSTAGES

Schiit Audio Mani

$149 ($159 silver)

Sporting the same compact design that Schiit's famous for and offering a surprising amount of flexibility, the Mani is one of the most cost-effective phono preamps on the market. It has four gain settings and two loading options via dip switches on the bottom and works equally well with both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, though sonically it may favor the mm group. The Mani did a fantastic job of presenting soundstage depth while keeping the noise floor to a minimum. It handled even complex music with grace and toe-tapping fun. This is the perfect phonostage for anyone interested in fantastic sound, reasonable cost, and the ability to use multiple cartridge types. (285)

MoFi Electronics StudioPhono

$349

Renowned recording and remastering experts Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab have taken the plunge into manufacturing analog hardware: two turntables and two companion phonostages, including the $349 StudioPhono. Design guru Tim de Paravicini lent a hand with the internal circuitry; features offer adjustable gain (40–66dB) and loading (75–47k ohms) for mm and mc cartridges, a mono setting option, and a subsonic filter. Clean and compact, the phonostage complements the MoFi 'tables sonically and visually. It has an ease of use and smooth sound with the UltraDeck 'table—and its small, square "power-on" light inspired by a mastering tape-deck button. (284)

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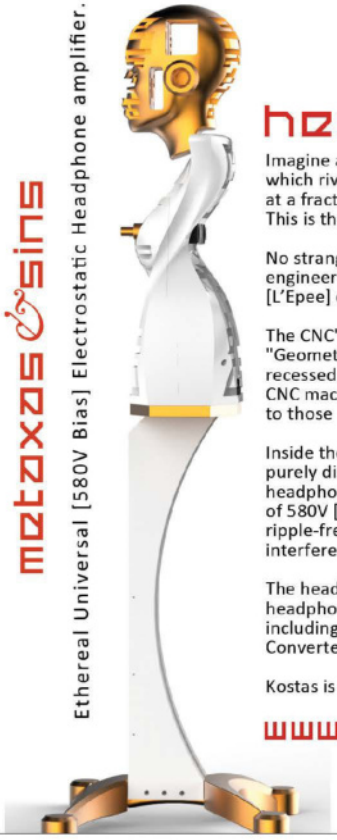
Ethereal Universal [580V Bias] Electrostatic Headphone amplifier.



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The CNC's casework also features one of Kostas' patternation called "Geometrika" which creates a visual patina of squares and rectangles recessed into an organic shape - requiring the most advanced 5-axis CNC machine to create it. Other patternations will be offered similar to those used in Kostas' Haute Creation work for S.T. Dupont of Paris.

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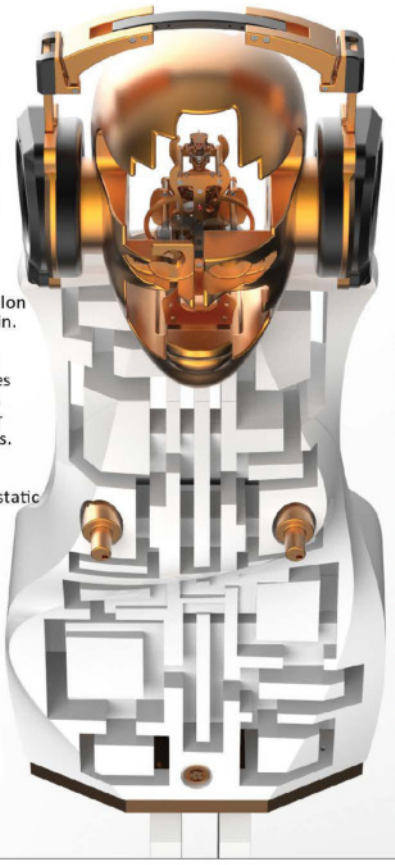

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Audio by Van Alstine Vision Q+

$579

This little marvel's compact size and low cost are made possible by the use of operational amplifiers. Frank Van Alstine's vision was to select the best-sounding modern ICs, and he eventually settled on the highly regarded Burr-Brown OPA627 op-amps. The circuit features a flexible mc-cartridge loading scheme. Expect plenty of low-level detail, a strong bass range, and superior dynamic contrasts. Transient speed and control can only be described as excellent. Tonal colors are somewhat muted through the upper midrange, suggesting that the Vision should ideally be matched with a romantic-sounding tube preamp. The recently updated "Q" version stands for "quiet" thanks to its improved signal-to-noise ratio and "+" for improved circuitry. (260)

iFi iPhono 3 Black Label

$599

The iFi iPhono 3 is a long, relatively thin and compact rectangle, with small dipswitches on the bottom. The input connections are at one end, and the outputs are at the other. It's as unassuming as a phonostage can be, but that simplicity hides a surprising flexibility. The iPhono features loading options from 22 ohms on up to 47k ohms, with six stops between, and either 36, 48, 60, or 72dB of gain. Low end is hefty, mids are equally smooth, and the upper registers really sparkle. The dynamics are extra tight and shimmery, likely due to the iPhono's very low background noise. Highly recommended. (317)

Vincent PHO 500

$699

For anyone trying to assemble a high-performance phono system on a reasonable budget (under $5k), the PHO-500 could be the ideal choice, since it delivers a high-quality, low-noise signal that can easily be mated with a wide variety of high-performance front ends. You also get the added benefit of a device that allows you to record your most treasured LPs at 96/24 resolution. With its external outboard power supply, the Vincent PHO 500 ranks as the quietest phono preamplifier SS has reviewed regardless of price. (313)

Gold Note PH-10

$1599 ($1199, PSU-10)

The solid-state PH-10 (and matching optional PSU-10 power supply) is a half-width component, which makes for easy and flexible placement in, or on top of, a cabinet or rack. Fit and finish are excellent. All functions (EQ curves, impedance loading, gain) can be adjusted and confirmed via a front-panel TFT display on-the-fly while playing music, allowing specific individual settings to be made for every single record. Its overall presentation is transparent and neutral (with a slightly warm tone and a weighty midrange). Some phonostages pursue "absolute technical objectivity" as their goal. The PH-10 is not that kind of product. It's all about the music. If you're a "truth-seeker," there are other products to choose from, but if you're a "pleasure-seeker," then the PH-10 is for you. (305)

Hegel V10

$1650

Norwegian-based Hegel had previously shied away from making a phonostage but has come out of the blocks with a high-performing unit that is easy to use and easy on the budget. The initial design brief was to create a small, inexpensive starter box for the budding, cost-conscious LP lover. As chief designer Bent Holter delved into the project, he soon realized that he could do much better if he put in the extra time and effort—and parts upgrades—to produce a reasonably priced phonostage that performs more like some of the more expensive units. Instead of op-amps, as one might expect at this price level, the V10 uses four ultra-low-noise discrete JFET transistors, connected in parallel to aid in reducing external noise, for both the moving-magnet and moving-coil inputs. The sound is remarkably detailed, open, and full-bodied. Plenty of mm and mc cartridge loading and gain settings are offered. The V10 is highly musical and "audiophile competent," to a degree that makes it an obvious audition choice for anyone seeking a phonostage close to the $1500–$2000 range—and possibly higher. (320)

Chord Huei

$1775

The Chord Huei is a compact black rectangle, which features four glowing lights bumped up along the front that control the loading options. The Huei includes gain steps from 49dB up to 70dB with six total stops in between for the mc section, and 21dB on up to 42dB with six stops for the mm section; loading allows for 100 ohms up to 3700 ohms for mc, and 47k ohms for mm. Sonically, the low end is solid and the mids very smooth; the overall presentation is on the warm end of the spectrum. (317)

Musical Surroundings Nova III

$2000

The Nova III is the third iteration of Mike Yee's phono preamplifier and represents a new direction, battery power giving way to a sophisticated "DC-to-DC converter to turn the single-ended wall power supply (+24V) to an isolated split power-supply (to isolate the Nova III further from the power mains)." The result is that the almost peerless neutrality of previous Novas has been retained but with a new impression of body, solidity, and dimensionality, almost as if the reproduction is a bit more grounded, yet without losing any sense of quickness, agility, timing, and detail, plus a real increase in dynamic punch, kick, and drive. Unrivaled in its ability to match impedance or capacitance to any MC or MM pickup on the market, the III is at once intrinsically superb yet also an outstanding value. (222)

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Parasound Halo JC 3+

$2499

It was only a matter of time before electronics design legend John Curl would author a phonostage for Parasound. Dubbed the JC 3+, it's a dual-mono design. Each channel is housed in its own extruded aluminum enclosure, and further isolated from the power supply with thick, low-carbon-steel partitions. With top-quality parts throughout (Curl notes that the passive EQ parts' values and quality are the same as in his renowned Vendetta Research SCP2B phono.) With every rotation from an LP collection, the JC 3+ conveys a heady mix of profound silence and kick-butt energy, a kiss of romance through the mids, and an ability to extract low-level information and define it within acoustic space. (245)

EAT E-Glo S with LPS

$3599 stand alone ($4999 bundled with LPS)

European Audio Team (E.A.T.) has taken the ECC83 dual-triode tube and merged it with solid-state electronics to create the E-Glo S mm/mc phonostage. When it is coupled with the LPS external linear power supply, the E-Glo S's performance improves, resulting in increased listening pleasure. Sonically, the E-Glo S/LPS combo produced a consistently easygoing sound that never ventured into aggression. While the E-Glo S/LPS isn't the most resolving or dynamically agile phonostage reviewer Andre Jennings has heard, it is fine enough to capture the essence of the music and deliver it with sufficient information to allow many hours of listening pleasure. (298)

PrimaLuna EVO 100

$3695

PrimaLuna's first standalone phonostage accepts both mm and low-output mc cartridges and provides a total gain of 60dB. It's an absolutely fabulous tube extravaganza. Not only are both gain stages tube based, but add tube rectification and tube regulation via a pair of EL34 pentodes and you have a unique circuit solution. It uses active inverse RIAA EQ based on feedback loops, emulating classics such as the Marantz 7 and Audio Research SP3a. The EVO is easy to integrate into a system. It's not only quiet but serves up a luscious midrange without losing sight of detail resolution, as well as image focus and 3D soundstaging, tube gear's traditional strengths. This superlative phonostage is bound to elevate everyone's vinyl playback experience to new heights. It has magnified DO's enjoyment level to the point where he just can't stop spinning vinyl. (339)

Pass Labs XP-17

$4500

Pass' entry-level, single-chassis, dual-mono design builds upon and updates its popular XP-15. Widely adjustable for mm and mc cartridges, sonically this solid-state phonostage does everything right. It speaks pure "analog" with a fluent voice, silent backgrounds, and an appealing warmth, liquidity, and midrange bloom. The XP-17, like virtually all Pass gear, suggests a more complex dimensionality that improves the width and depth of soundstages. Its rich tonal palette defines and makes more meaningful each instrument of the orchestra. Vocals have shape and form—tactile presence. Its role is to convey the signal with minimal commentary, while letting the music prevail in all its detail and emotion. A splendid component. (302)

Boulder 508

$5400

The superb 508 mm/mc phonostage is a fully balanced solid-state design that has all the virtues of the traditional Boulder sound. It's very quiet, allowing the phonostage to extract tiny nuances from LPs that fuller-sounding phono preamps might gloss over. The 508 is superbly linear in performance, allowing it to navigate the treble region without a hint of glare. Bass is robust but never overwhelming. The resolving power of the 508 means that is capable of rendering the most delicate musical passages with finesse and ease. The 508 may be diminutive in size, but not in performance. (313)

MoFi Electronics MasterPhono

$6000

Assigned a $6000 retail price with a single-box mandate, veteran electronics designer Peter Madnick implemented a full-featured, two-box-in-one chassis configuration. He logically located low-level JFET-based amplification and passive RIAA circuitry in a copper shielded box within the rear enclosure adjacent to the panel-mounted balanced and single-ended input and output jacks. The noisier, microprocessor-directed, remote-controllable switching pizazz

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was isolated in the front chassis directly behind the multiple knobs, adjustable gain and resistive loading choices, input selector, mono/stereo switch, subsonic filter, and paired multifunction meters. Three inputs offer moving-coil transimpedance (single-ended *or* balanced) and balanced *and* single-ended voltage-gain selectable inputs (for a total of three). Madnick managed to stay "in budget" and include a full-function milled-aluminum remote control and a choice of walnut or black side "cheeks." Oh, and the MasterPhono's sonic performance is as enticing as its feature set. (Forthcoming)

VTL TP-2.5i

$6000

This nimble and lithe performer punches above its weight. While it does not provide the resolution of megabuck phonostages, the TP-2.5i sails easily through complex orchestral passages and dynamic rock songs alike. VTL offers used-adjustable cartridge impedance matching, as well as different levels of gain. Inputs for both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges are also included. Not least it also has a mono switch. Consistent with the VTL house sound, the TP-2.5i unites dynamism with seduction. Thanks to the 12AU7 tube in the moving-coil section, the touch of tube bliss that the TP-2.5i brings to vinyl reproduction is altogether a good thing, adding a dollop of beauty to more than a few LPs. (302)

Coincident Speaker Technology Phono Statement

$6499

Coincident has surpassed itself with its marvelous new tube phonostage. Powered by a 40-pound separate power supply that connects to the main unit with an umbilical cord, the Coincident packs an unbelievable wallop, particularly in the bass. The Coincident is tailor-made to drive rock or orchestral music. Its rich midrange, deep bass, and sizzling dynamic swings make a wide variety of LPs sound more lifelike, endowing the music with a real sense of drama and urgency. Vocals have a creaminess to them that is difficult to resist. Put bluntly, the Statement makes a real statement. (322)

Aesthetix Rhea/Rhea Signature

$7000/$10,000

With three inputs, variable cartridge-loading—adjustable via remote control—and a front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is a versatile phonostage. Although it has tons of gain, the noise level is relatively low, making it compatible with a wide range of cartridges. The Rhea's family resemblance to the Calypso linestage is unmistakable: transient quickness, effortlessness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage. The Signature version of Aesthetix's Rhea vividly demonstrates the value of component quality. Although the circuit is identical to that of the Rhea, the Signature uses ultra-premium parts. The result is a much better bottom end, even smoother timbres, and (surprisingly) greater dimensionality. Rhea owners can upgrade to the Signature for the difference in retail price. The Signature upgrade is expensive but well worth it. (151, 196)

Zesto Andros Deluxe II

$8300

This phonostage is unmistakably Zesto from the defining wave in the industrial design. The two-stage, tube gain system is the quietest RB has experienced, while at the same time excelling at dynamics and detail. The Zesto remains true to the music, delivering instrumental textures and remaining tonally neutral, without blooming in the midrange as many tube-based phonostages do. The Zesto is never fatiguing and will provide hours of listening enjoyment for all types of music. (328)

Esoteric E-02

$9500

Esoteric's top-of-the-line, reference phonostage, the fully balanced E-02 is refreshing for all the unnecessary things it doesn't do, which is essentially everything but amplify a very small signal (phono cartridge) thousands of times. This is a beautifully built and executed solid-state design with a high potential 72dB of gain in balanced mode, served up in an "invisible hand" manner that reminded reviewer Allan Moulton of other reference solid-state phonostages from Boulder and Constellation Audio which are 3–7 times more costly. Not for those who like to fiddle with fine loading adjustments, EQ options, or tube rolling (because there aren't any). The reward for the E-02's set-and-forget simplicity is a listening experience without a forced perspective. It quickly establishes in the listener a trust that the amplified cartridge's signal is simply the best version of itself, and nothing more. At $9500, the least expensive phonostage that AM has heard that can retain this trust. (294)

Zanden Audio Model 120S

$10,500

This entirely solid-state phonostage (with outboard power supply) from the great Japanese audio engineer Kazutoshi Yamada is the entry-level companion piece to his Model 8120 power amp and 3100 linestage preamp. Like the amp and preamp, the Model 120 is sonically superb, designed with an almost magical ear to what makes music sound sweet and lifelike. When you throw in very high resolution of inner detail, great bass, the incredible soundstaging and imaging for which Yamada's Zanden gear has always been famous, and (for those whose taste tends this way) a panoply of user-selectable EQ curves, you get a demure little phonostage that is very hard to best no matter how much you spend. (259)

high signal level to help achieve this end, which is good news for fans of ultra-low-output mc cartridges. The XP-27 is also notable for its ease of use. Front-panel knobs have multiple settings for resistive load and reactive load (i.e., capacitance); plus, there are three gain settings, appropriate for pretty much any species of cartridge. The XP-27 has two sets of RCA inputs; so, analog aficionados with two turntables can keep both decks connected at once. RCA and XLR outputs, one set of each, are provided. A superb choice for vinyl-loving old hands, as well as those who may be coming home after a sojourn in the digital desert. (316)

Pass Labs XP-27

$12,075

Although it's Nelson's surname that the CNC machine is programmed to etch into the faceplate of Pass Labs products, for more than 25 years his engineering partner, Wayne Colburn, has been largely responsible for designing the company's preamps, phonostages, and integrated amplifiers, leaving Nelson to focus on his main love, power amplifiers. The XP-27 is a dual-chassis design employing double-shielded toroids, two of them, in the power supply. Colburn is obsessed with lowering the noise floor of the electronic devices he creates—switching and loading in this phonostage is accomplished at a relatively

Balanced Audio Technology VK-P90

$12,995

The restless mind of Balanced Audio Technology's Viktor Khomenko is constantly searching for ways to improve his mostly tube products. The VK-P90 phonostage is a prime example of his readiness to move toward more elegant sonic solutions. It features a shift away from capacitors in the output stage to proprietary transformers. The aim, as always, is to deliver increased detail, a lower noise floor, and above all, a more refined sound. On all counts, BAT has succeeded handsomely. The number-one issue that can plague phonostages, particularly tube ones, is noise in the form of hum or buzz. Not here. The VK-P90 is dead-quiet, allowing you to hear deep into the grooves. There is no hint of sibilance or glare. Rather, the unit has a full and lush sound but without sacrificing the micro-detail so treasured by audiophiles. While it remains slightly voiced on the darker side of the sonic spectrum, the VK-P90 resides at the apex of phonostage design. (263)

Moon Audio 810LP

$13,000

The 810LP is technically impressive, particularly its heroic power-supply design and vibration-isolation measures. It's also solidly built, offering a wide array of gain and loading options that makes optimizing its performance for any cartridge a snap. With sound quality that is world-class by any measure, the 810LP combines a dead-quiet background, a pristine clarity of timbre, outstanding dynamics, and an expansive and well-defined soundstage. Even under the microscope of the Magico Q7 Mk II loudspeaker, the 810LP impressed, not just with its audiophile attributes but also with how musically compelling it made LP listening. (231)

Brinkmann Audio Edison MK II

$14,990

Reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn listened to the Edison both through the Brinkmann Marconi and Ypsilon Silver PST-100 preamp, which afforded him the opportunity to hear exactly what it was—and was not—doing. The sheer artistry that the Edison conveyed on the Philips recording *The Delectable Elly Ameling* was a combination of the sublime and the beautiful. On Mozart's wonderful motet *Exsultate, Jubilate,* the Edison tracked every syllable, every quaver, every trill that Ameling enunciated during her ravishing performance. There wasn't a trace of sibilance or harshness. Instead, the Brinkmann delivered a posh, upholstered sound that was quite delectable. Breathtaking, actually. (301)

Triangle Art P-200

$15,000

The P-200 can comfortably accommodate both mm and mc cartridges. It distances itself from the competition by virtue of its superb spatiality, transient speed, and resolution of low-level detail. Expect a compelling dynamic range capable of fleshing out subtle microdynamic nuances as well as scaling orchestral peaks with composure. The P-200 simply gets out of the way and allows the music to ebb and flow without dynamic constraints or tube colorations. Most of you will be perfectly happy with the stock tube complement, which squeezes out a fair amount of tube magic, but know that the P-200 responds well to basic tube rolling should you get the urge to experiment with your favorite preamp tube types. (334)

VTL TP-6.5 Series II Signature

$15,000 ($18,000 mc trans)

The latest iteration of VTL's hybrid tube/JFET phono preamplifier incorporates, among other new design features, a series of significant circuit upgrades borrowed from the top-of-the line TL-7.5 Series III Reference linestage preamplifier, as well as new more robust power storage for the active mc stage. The 6.5's operating system offers a generous feature set and pushbutton convenience with up to 68dB mc gain and a wide range of resistive loads. The solid-state/tube combo produces the expected and desired "kiss of liquidity" musical flow and the generous harmonic presentation tube fans crave, while maintaining a pleasingly neutral timbral balance, never imposing upon the music an identifiable coloration and delivering nimble, realistic transient attack. The 6.5's bottom octave reproduction is solid, tight, deep, and well controlled. (335)

FM Acoustics FM 122-MKII

$18,975

A tiny Class A phonostage (and linearizer) with infinitely adjustable curves (one of FM's most famous innovations) to properly EQ mono recordings made before the RIAA era, the FM 122-MKII tells you the truth about LPs without robbing them of their inherent musicality. This is a very transparent component that gives you a keen insight into how recordings are

being recorded, without adding any sense of the analytic or much color of its own. Regardless of the virtues of newer-gen Swiss gear (and there are many), this still remains a formula for successful playback, and FM Acoustics still remains a marque you ought to audition before making an ultra-high-end purchase. (286)

Zesto Audio Téssera Reference

$19,900

The Greek word téssera refers to the number 4. The name is fitting in function since the recently updated Andros Téssera Reference phonostage supports four inputs. The two-box (main unit and power supply) Téssera accepts two moving-magnet and two moving-coil inputs, or up to four low-output moving-coil cartridges with the use of two additional external step-up devices. The Téssera has adjustable gain and variable loading (twelve loading selections for its moving-coil inputs). Sonically, it is full-bodied and composed. Everything stays in place, solidly rooted to its location, and is presented with a feeling of warmth. The sound created by this phonostage maintains dynamic development and much of a note's decay when called for. Without favoring one over the other, it reproduces all music genres fairly evenly. (287)

Van den Hul Grail SE

$25,995

Audio legend A.J Van den Hul is famed for his Speed Racer-like cartridges, but he has also made a serious run at phonostages in recent years. The solid-state, fully balanced Grail SE is his effort to produce a top-drawer phonostage. It features a current-mode input that is supposed to optimize the energy transfer between a moving-coil cartridge and the input and

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ensure that there is zero hum. If the Grail is anything to go by, the proponents of current-mode phonostages are onto something. The Grail packed a real wallop on jazz big band and orchestral recordings, a testament to its wonderfully low noise floor. It did not possess the bloom of tubed units nor reach quite as far into the back of the hall as some other current-mode phonostages. But its silky sound and dynamism are an enticing package, indeed. (302)

Constellation Revelation Andromeda

$28,000

The John Curl-designed Andromeda uses some of the same building blocks found in the Pictor linestage, including three separate power supplies in an outboard chassis. (A separate optional DC Filter unit can also be used.) The Andromeda can accommodate up to four cartridges—two moving coils and two moving magnets (one each XLR and RCA). Impedance for moving-coils can be set from 5 ohm to 999 ohms in one-ohm increments via a knob on the main unit's rear panel. Moving-magnet settings allow for three capacitive and three resistive loading options. The trick, as with any phonostage, is to apply the RIAA equalization curve accurately and add enough gain to increase the low-voltage cartridge output to line-level standard (about 2V in most consumer audio products), while also preserving signal integrity and keeping noise to a minimum. The Andromeda does a marvelous job at these things. Reviewer Kirk Midtskog has heard plenty of mega-buck turntable rigs, and the Andromeda made his sound much much closer to those setups than he thought possible—fabulously clear, open, impactful playback. (294)

Zanden 1200 Signature

$29,500

When JV heard the original version of the tube-powered Zanden 1200S phonostage with user-selectable EQ, better than a decade-and-a-half ago, he was amazed by its reproduction of acoustic space. It simply put more acreage between and among instruments than any other audio component he'd ever reviewed, and with that incredible increase in separation came a commensurate increase in the audibility of each instrument in an ensemble—what it was playing and how it was being played. The only downside to the original Zanden 1200S was its bass range, which was a mite fat and plummy in the way that tube gear then sounded. The latest iteration of the 1200 no longer suffers from bass bloat. Indeed, it is positively superb in the bottom octaves, reproducing pitch, timbre, intensity, and duration with the blur-free clarity of solid-state. The Zanden's clarity extends from bottom to top, making it one of the highest-resolution tube phonostage JV has heard. (293, 342)

CH Precision P1

$31,000 ($48,00 w/X1 power supply; $89,000 two chassis dual mono configuration with two X1 power supplies)

This current-amplification (or transimpedance) phonostage, with outboard X-1 power supply, from the illustrious Swiss engineers at CH Precision boasts enormous dynamic swings, cavernous soundstaging, superb transient fidelity, and unrelenting grip. Though it does not pass along the same amount of harmonic information as reviewer JHb's reference Ypsilon phonostage—a difference JHb ascribes to the eternal tubes-versus-transistors divide—champions of solid-state are going to point to the CH's excellent neutrality, dynamic heft, and ability to peer into the most remote recesses of an LP. Tube lovers are going to find the CH too neutral. It just doesn't add anything to the mix. Rather, it reveals in microscopic detail what is taking place during the performance. JHb's experience has been that, with a level of detail and background silence that tube units cannot summon up, it is useful, even salutary, to toggle between the CH Precision and his Ypsilon. The sheer accuracy of the P1 is enticing in itself. (297)

Audio Research Reference Phono 10

$35,000

In the heart of the midrange, where vocals and instrumentals live, JV has heard no more realistic phonostage than Audio Research's two-box Reference Phono 10 phonostage. Why this unit and ARC's companion Reference 10 Linestage are so extraordinary is easier to hear than it is to describe. Through the Ref 10, imaging is fluid and dimensional rather than fixed and flat. As a result, instruments that usually sound as if they are pinned to a cork board come alive—seemingly growing larger and moving closer as they play more loudly and receding as they play more softly. When you couple this lifelike imaging to the most spot-on reproduction of midband timbres JV has heard from any electronics, you get in the midrange (though no disgrace, the Ref Phono 10 is not the champ in the bass or treble) one of the most realistic phonostages on the market. The Ref Phono 10 comes with a touchscreen and a remote that allows you to select loading, EQ, and many other parameters without having to hoist your fat ass off the sofa. (242)

Goldmund PH3.8 NEXTGEN

$44,975

Goldmund's original PH3 phonostage was released in 1995. There followed a long dry spell wherein the company concentrated on digital playback, but with the LP revival of the past decade Goldmund has seen the light, and the PH3.8 NEXTGEN is the first proof. Unlike the single-box PH3, the PH3.8 NEXTGEN is a two-chassis component, with a separate external power supply. The unit's slew rate of >80V/µs and rise time of <400ns, combined with its very low noise and very high bandwidth, are said to be keys to its transient speed and dynamic weight, all of which are manifestly apparent. But the PH3.8

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NEXTGEN doesn't just deliver the lifelike speed and impact of hard transients; it also, and simultaneously, gives you the soft conical wood of, say, a drumstick's tip and the sandy texture of the batter head, shell, and snare head—so you're not just hearing a brief electrifying moment of contact, like a match being struck, but also the color, texture, and action of the instruments making that contact as the event unfolds in time. (312)

Boulder 2108

$62,000

Boulder made waves with its 2008 phonostage well over a decade ago, but the 2108 shows that its efforts have not crested. Quite the contrary. The fully balanced 2108 is markedly superior to its predecessor, both in terms of a lower noise floor and a more mellifluous sound. Gone is any hint of the sterility. Instead, the 2108, which has a separate power supply, is a suave performer. Its iron-fisted control is always in service of the music rather than the reverse. On LP after LP, the 2108 conveys the phenomenal transient accuracy that has become a hallmark of Boulder equipment. It stands at the apex of solid-state reproduction of vinyl records. (306)

Soulution 757

€65,000

Soulution calls this novel, ingeniously designed unit a "deemphasis" preamplifier. Why? Because it can not only handle moving-coil, moving-iron, and moving-magnet cartridges (as its predecessor, JV's reference Soulution 755 did) but can also boost and equalize the signals of DS Audio optical cartridges (in a circuit designed with the cooperation of DS' own Aki Aoyagi) or the output, EQ (NAB or IEC), and alignment of tape heads in an R2R deck, giving you the potential of using five different kinds of analog sources with one box! On top of this, the 757 includes a built-in Soulution Seven Series preamplifier, which means that analog devotees can make a single purchase, rather than buying a phonostage, an optical EQ, an outboard tape head-amp, and a stand-alone linestage preamplifier (with associated cabling). Happily, the 757's unique versatility is matched by superb sonics, which are even better than those of the fabulous 755, thanks to superior common-mode rejection (>125dB), increased bandwidth (to 2MHz), and astonishing linearity (deviation from deemphasis curves reduced to ±0.1dB). The thing sounds wonderful, blessed with all the virtues of Soulution solid-state (warmth, solidity, three-dimensionality, vanishingly low noise) to which greater resolution, even lower noise, and fuller extension have now been added. What's not to like? JV's new reference and a nominee for this year's Product of the Year Awards. (Forthcoming)

CH Precision P10

$76,000 (two chassis), $80,000 (two chassis)in Anthraciteor SatinGold; $132,000 (four-chassis dual-mono configuration); $140,000 (four-chassis dual-mono configurationin Anthracite or Satin Gold); $2250 Optional EQ filter cards(pair)

CH Precision's engineers figured by moving the original P1's power supply from the main chassis outboard it would gain a few dBs of improved signal-to-noise ratio. So, for the new P10 they did just that and got the expected measured improvement. They weren't prepared for the substantially better bass extension and greatly improved bottom-octave transient fastidiousness, the dazzlingly better spatial presentation and image focus, and the substantially improved transparency—all of which was easily heard in "A/B" demos at Munich High End 2023. CH engineers added a second voltage-based input, so now there are a pair each of transimpedance and voltage-based options. Unlike the P1, which had an optional performance enhancing outboard X1 power supply, the P10's outboard chassis is, of course, mandatory. The umbilical's supply end is hard wired, so be sure to order one that's appropriately long for your installation needs. (Forthcoming)

VAC Statement

$80,000

You're really gonna have to be devoted to vinyl (and madcap spending) to afford this two-chassis, all-tube phonostage from VAC's Kevin Hayes. But… if you've got the dough and the itch, you're also going to have to go a very long way to find a superior glass-bottle unit. Capable of 76dB gain (which can be upped to 82dB at customer request), this thing has more input headroom than any other phonostage JV has had in his system. The sonic results are audible, as the Statement Phono Stage never hits a "dynamic ceiling," the way other tube and transistor phonostages so often do. Plus, you will get the most exquisitely dark, rich timbres and beautifully resolved textures you've heard this side of an SET. Alongside the Zanden 1200, the Statement has the best low and high end of any tube phonostage JV has heard. (263)

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CD PLAYERS

Arcam CDS50

$1320

Unimposing in its dimensions and weight, the Arcam CDS50 employs a SABRE 9038 Reference chipset for D-to-A conversion—up to 32-bit/192kHz for PCM sources as well as (DoP) DSD. The disc drawer is a slow-loading plastic affair that doesn't inspire confidence, but the player delivers gutsy electric bass/kick drum sound on well-engineered rock recordings. The soundstage presented is somewhat narrower than with competing (and more expensive) products. Downloading the iOS/Android MusicLife app to a phone or tablet gets one connected to several streaming services and to Internet radio. (300)

Yamaha CD-S1000

$1799

Available for a decade and with its list price recently reduced by $500, the CD-S1000 is something of a "senior citizen" among digital source components. There are no streaming or networking capabilities, but if all you need is silver-disc playback, this 33-pound, built-like-a-tank machine does the job very well. The player uses a pair of Burr-Brown PCM 1796 DACs to handle sample rates up to 192kHz and plays SACDs in their "native" DSD format. The disc drawer has a gearless mechanism in a steel/wood chassis and offers exceptionally smooth, quiet operation. There are both coaxial and optical digital outputs, so the CD-S1000 is an excellent candidate to serve as a transport with a high-end DAC. (300)

Technics SL-G700M2

$3499

Technics' SL-G700M2, the successor to the SL-G700, combines a CD/SACD player, DAC, and streamer in one capable package. All you need is an amplifier and speakers for a complete digitally based system. It offers just about any input you'll ever need, as well as compatibility with a wide range of streaming services. This is the kind of product that might change the mind of even fanatic believers in analog; it is certainly one that every audiophile who has a digital front end that is several years old should audition. It makes it clear that there have been real advances in sound quality in recent years, ones you can really enjoy. It offers a superior disc player and DAC with equally good streaming capability. It did not perfectly match the sound quality of a two-piece digital front end costing nearly four times as much, but the sonic differences between the SL-G700M2 and that new top-quality DAC were limited and audible only on the best recordings. They consisted of minor differences in low-level resolution and in soundstage width and depth. Overall, the SL-G700M2 delivers on its promise of extensive functionality and superb sound. (338)

Bryston BCD-3

$4495

In a world where CD players are fast becoming obsolete, the Bryston BCD-3 bows with a musical and sonic generosity that doesn't come along every day. The company's latest CD player represents a substantial upgrade over its lauded BCD-1 (there was no BCD-2). Enhancements include an entirely new transport and dual 32-bit AKM 4490 DAC chips. Compared to its predecessor, the BCD-3 offers far better channel separation, resulting not only in a wider soundstage but also more solid imaging. The new model also boasts a lower noise floor, so music emerges with greater purity, tangibility, and dynamic contrast. Thoughtfully, Bryston included a high-grade digital output. Thus, if outboard DACs evolve beyond the superb BDA-3-based module within the BCD-3, owners can utilize the Bryston as a pure transport. If you're considering buying one last CD player—one that's future-proof and won't break the bank—the BCD-3 should top your list. (289)

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McIntosh Labs MCT500

$5500

The MCT500 SACD transport was introduced for audiophiles who already own a McIntosh preamp, integrated amp, or receiver equipped with one of the company's proprietary DAC modules. It will handle virtually any 4.75-inch disc on the planet, including MQA (though only at Red Book resolution) and, of course, hybrid SACDs. With no built-in DAC, the MCT500 allows direct access to the DSD files on an SACD disc via a proprietary cable that can be connected only to other McIntosh products with the reciprocal MCT jack. It's thus impossible to speak of its sound because its sound is that of the partnering McIntosh component. As auditioned by PS with the C52 and C53 preamps, its reproduction is as good as he has experienced with any other SACD/CD players or DACs, bettered by none and equaled only by a very few. (315)

Aesthetix Romulus

$9000

This all-tube CD player and DAC is one of the great bargains in high-end audio. What makes the Romulus special is that it sounds so "non-digital." Rather than sounding flat and congealed, it opens up the spatial presentation, giving instruments and voices room to breathe. The Romulus couples this expansiveness with an unusual (for digital) sense of top-octave air and openness. The tonal balance is rich and warm in the bass, which, when added to its treble smoothness, results in an engaging and fatigue-free presentation. The Romulus doesn't sound "tubey" in the classic sense, but neither does it sound like solid-state. The design and build-quality are beyond what's expected at this price. If you have no analog sources, the Romulus can serve as a preamplifier and DAC with multiple digital inputs, provided you purchase the variable-output option ($1000). Thanks to an innovative hybrid analog/digital volume control, there's no loss of resolution. (243)

Mark Levinson N°5101

$9900

With a disc drive that will play CD and SACD, along with a fully equipped streaming DAC, the Mark Levinson N°5101 will handle just about any digital source. The player is compatible with PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz, as well as DSD up to 4x. On the technical side, the unit has a 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC with user-selectable digital filters and a proprietary jitter-reduction circuit. The output stage is fully discrete, direct-coupled, and dual monaural, with the signal output on RCA and XLR jacks. You can operate the unit via a traditional handheld remote control or via a custom app, called 5Kontrol. The player has excellent sound quality, particularly in the transition from the upper bass to the lower midrange, which preserves the natural warmth of music without softening it. (322)

Luxman D-10X

$16,995

Though reviewer Paul Seydor has no experience with the few other MQA disc players on the domestic market, it would amaze him if any of them offers quite the playback options of this top-of-the-line disc spinner-cum-DAC. Whether streaming, playing downloads, or spinning five-inch music discs, the D-10X will play virtually any audio-only two-channel or hybrid disc on the planet. While there are too many new features and aspects of its design and engineering to list, at its heart is the company's proprietary Lx DTM-I transport and ROHM Semiconductor's new BD34301EKV D/A converter (its maiden voyage in an audio component). USB inputs will handle PCM from 44.1kHz to 786kHz and DSD from 2.8MHz to 22.4MHz (1-bit). With outstanding build, engineering, performance, and functional and ergonomic characteristics, the 10X is unlikely to leave you hankering for anything more or better for a very long time to come. Though MQA discs are scarce on the domestic market, the 10X's superb handling of Red Book and higher PCM discs, not to mention SACD, and the equally fine onboard DAC, which can be used independently of the disc transport, still conjoin to make this player an attractive proposition despite the admittedly high ticket. Best of all is the Luxman "sound": supremely musical yet now with a degree of resolution, detail, and neutrality that will reveal without undue editorializing everything that is on any source you care to feed it. The D-10X is, if by only a slim margin, quite the finest all-in-one CD/SACD/DAC integrated with which PS any sort of long experience. (317)

Metronome AQWO

$20,000 (tube version is $22,300)

French manufacturer Metronome has produced an outstanding top-loading CD/SACD player and DAC that can decode any PCM format up to 32 bits and 384kHz, as well as DSD. The player employs a D&M SACD mechanism with proprietary modifications, and one AK4497 DAC chip per channel. A Class A tube output stage (as auditioned) is optional. The AQWO distinguishes itself in three ways. First, the player is especially good dynamically, particularly when the signal is complex and high in level. Second, the treble is smooth, resulting in very natural timbre on strings, woodwinds, brass, and soprano voice. Third, the player infuses the music with air and life, with an exciting front-of-hall perspective. Overall, the AQWO is an outstanding multi-format disc player and DAC. (298)

T+A PDT 3100HV CD/SACD Transport

$23,450

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of T+A's own design, and under the control of T+A's proprietary software, the PDT3100 HV isn't another "me-too" transport based on an off-the-shelf mechanism of questionable longevity. This CD/SACD transport offers every conceivable type of digital output, including a proprietary signal connection to the DAC for improved performance. The SACD performance, in conjunction with the SDV 3100HV DAC/preamp (connected via the proprietary digital link), is unmatched in RH's experience. The battleship build-quality, extensive features, fabulous casework, and beautiful fit 'n' finish suggest a product of twice the price. (301)

dCS Rossini Apex

$36,800 ($32,800 without transport)

The Rossini may be the sweetest of sweet spots within the dCS lineup. All the technical goodies of the latest, far more expensive Vivaldi flagship are here in a single, gorgeous, easy-to-use chassis. The Rossini will play pretty much anything—either locally attached or streamed—other than a physical SACD. And it will play that material, regardless of source, with a rare combination of alacrity, refinement, and musicality. Compared to the entry-level Debussy, the Rossini is a huge step up in every way. Yet, upon direct comparison with the Vivaldi, it's clear that while the flagship is superior in several ways, the Rossini gets you most of the way there. Furthermore, dCS has made good on its promise of product longevity through continual software upgrades. Specifically, the Rossini recently received both Roon and MQA support, making it one of the best all-around CD player/DACs on the market. (285, new Apex version not yet reviewed)

CH Precision D1.5

$41,000–$49,500 depending on configuration

Although a formidable CD/SACD transport/player in its own right, the D1 (now updated to the not-yet-reviewed D1.5) comes into its own when paired with the companion CH Precision C1 DAC/Pre. The two communicate via the company's proprietary CH-Link, and once you hear the Link's open, natural sound, you will never go back to SPDIF. Furthermore, the CH-Link can carry raw DSD straight from an SACD to the C1. The combination of D1, C1, and CH-Link results in the best SACD sound AT has yet heard. In addition to serving as a transport, the D1 can be configured as a stand-alone digital player. In this capacity, the unit is excellent but more expensive than viable alternatives. Nor can one leverage the D1's raw DSD capability if not mating it to the C1. The bottom line is: Buy the D1 with the C1. (239)

dCS Vivaldi Apex

$46,500 ($140,000 for entire stack)

Digital reproduction has long resembled the equivalent of a nuclear arms-race between rival powers seeking to build bigger and better weapons. DCS has now stepped onto the digital battlefield with a potent contender, the Vivaldi Apex DAC. It offers very spiffy performance, indeed. When contrasted with the first-generation Vivaldi, it is superior in a variety of sonic arenas, including image stability, timbral purity, and dynamic prowess. One of the most notable areas of improvement is in the bass, which sounds weightier and more textured. Overall, the Apex supplies a more supple and richer musical reproduction that its predecessor could not quite attain. At the heart of the dCS is its Ring DAC, which has been heavily modified to offer a lower noise floor and improved linearity. Apex stands at the apex of digital reproduction. (333)

Kalista DreamPlay XC

$79,000 (optional Silent Base $8700)

The high-end French audio company Kalista markets the DreamPlay XC as a "universal digital source." And given the fact that it combines four devices (CD/SACD player, streamer, DAC, and digital preamp with Leedh volume control) in one gorgeous, touchscreen-equipped chassis, cleverly suspended on an optional anti-vibration base and powered by a large outboard supply, it kinda is. Beyond its remarkable versatility, what makes the DreamPlay so special is its sound on physical media, which, to JV's ear, is nonpareil for digital playback. The DreamPlay has a liquidity, density of timbre, and three-dimensionality rarely found in digital components, coming so close to the best analog it shocked JV. Of course, it also offers the resolution, dynamics, and bass that we rightly associate with ones and zeroes, but it offers them without any of the thinning down or whiting out of body and timbre or the etching of transients that we (or some of us) also associate with digital sources. With CD and SACD, this is a world-class unit that JV (not one of digital audio's most enthusiastic fans) could happily live with until the cows come home from wherever they go when they're out and about. It will be his nominee for DAC of the Year and is now one of his references. (Forthcoming)

DAC/PREAMPLIFIERS

Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital

$499

The Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital offers audiophiles a very high-value DAC/digital preamp at an almost ridiculously low price. Not only does it include a plethora of important features and capabilities, but it sounds good, has an elegantly designed control surface, and is expandable. Perhaps

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the best way to view the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 (and most of the components in the Pro-Ject S2 line) is as a sonic building block or Lego. You can acquire Pro-Ject components to do exactly what you need, no more and no less, and acquire them as you need them. While not quite bespoke audio, the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 is one small part of an elegant system that gives even audiophiles with limited means a way to assemble a first-class audio system tailored specifically to their needs and requirements. Small, in the case of the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 is, indeed, beautiful. (289)

NAD C 658

$1999

NAD's C 658 offers a wide range of features and functions in an affordable and good-sounding package. This streaming DAC, operated via the BluOS app or remote control, has a phonostage, analog inputs, subwoofer outputs with configurable crossover, full analog and digital preamplifier functions, and Dirac Live DSP room correction. This last feature has the ability to greatly improve the sound, particularly in problematic listening rooms. The C 658's sound is excellent, with tuneful bass and a spacious soundstage. (313)

Gold Note DS-10 EVO

$3695 (PSU-10 adds $1299)

The Gold Note DS-10 EVO DAC/preamp with PSU-10 power supply is capable of producing reference-level sonics and has a feature set that includes Tidal Connect, DSD up to DSD 256, dual-band Wi-Fi, and other features. If you bypass all the offered flavorings, the DS-10 EVO sound is neutral, which is a good place to start, especially if you plan to alter the sound in some way. When you factor in a dedicated remote and headphone capabilities as well as Roon and MQA compatibility, you have a component that does everything that a current-generation DAC/preamplifier needs to do, and it does it well. (Forthcoming)

Bryston BDA-3.14

$4495 w/HDMI ($3695 w/o HDMI)

The goal of the BDA-3.14 was simple in theory, but more challenging in practice—to add a streaming function to the BDA-3 platform while retaining the same high sound quality as the BDA-3. Reviewer Steven Stone thinks Bryston's efforts were successful. The DAC section for the BDA-3.14 is built around a pair of AK4490 chips, just like that of the BDA-3. While BDA-3 is a fixed-level output device without any volume control, the BDA-3.14 volume control utilizes the volume adjustment feature built into the AK4490 DAC chip. And instead of building a server from scratch Bryston began with a Raspberry Pi 3 minicomputer as its Internet gateway device. Why a Pi? Because it works reliably and has excellent support from Pi. In short, the BDA-3.14 is a first-class component that could be the center of any high-performance digital-audio system. (309)

HiFi Rose RS150B

$4995

The HiFi Rose RS150B could be the "Swiss Army knife" of streaming DACs, with integral streaming support, MQA decoding, Roon Ready certification, a pair of analog input jacks with variable output level, and compatibility with DSD all the way up to DSD512. The build-quality is extraordinary with a chassis machined from a solid aluminum block. But the Rose's most important quality is the sound it achieves from the latest ESS Sabre ES9038PRO. Never before has RB experienced this level of sonic quality from a streaming source. (322)

Cary Audio DMS-550

$5495

Anchored by superb sonics and wide-ranging connectivity, the DMS-550 is also one of the most format-friendly and un-finicky 'net audio players you're likely to find (at least for the next six months). Cary's third-generation player is fully operational for streaming or file playback, wireless or Ethernet. It's also MQA-equipped and Roon ready, thus even more sonically rewarding. With the latest AKM "Velvet Sound" chip, it plays back up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM, as well as native DSD up to 512. The sound of the player is full and warm, dynamic and quick, but never to the point of etch or grain. In short, a winner. Solidly constructed and reasonably priced, it includes an intuitive remote control, which makes navigation a snap (although the new controller app is even better). The large, bright, full-color front-panel display imparts loads of information and is suitably legible from afar. (DMS-500 reviewed in 275, DMS-650 unreviewed)

T+A MP 200

$5900

T+A's MP 200 is best thought of as a CD transport plus a Roon-compatible streamer. There's no DAC inside, but the MP 200 does everything to tee up multiple digital sources—including HDD, SDD, and thumb drives—for a downstream DAC. When combined with T+A's DAC 200, the two act as a single unit. The MP 200 is a superb-sounding streamer, perhaps because it houses the same streaming module as T+A's top separates. Further, the in-house-built CD transport rivals the best in the world. Add in a gorgeous, petite form factor plus great value, and you've got a home run. (335)

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Linn Selekt DSM

$6370 (configurable)

The Select DSM is Linn's completely reworked network music streaming platform, sitting just above its entry Majik series. In its base configuration, it includes a preamplifier with an mc/mm phonostage, streams virtually any digital source, including Tidal, Qobuz, and TuneIn, and uses Linn's native room-correction software, Space Optimisation. Options include internal stereo amplification and an upgraded Katalyst DAC. The platform is sleek, sexy, and a pleasure to interact with via the six programmable smart buttons, the variably illuminated, top-mounted dial, or the 19-button remote. Creating a clean, incisive, and accurate sonic envelope, filled with dynamic contrast, expressive nuance, authentic tone and texture, and expansive, accurate staging, especially when taken to the next level with Space Optimisation, the Selekt sets the bar in its price and category. (300)

Lumin P1

$10,000

The P1's extensive feature set delivers exactly the right functionality for today's music systems—all from a compact one-box component. This Roon-ready streamer includes a superb MQA-compatible DAC along with nine digital and analog inputs with source switching and a volume control, obviating the need for a separate preamplifier. Just connect to a network and run the analog outputs (balanced or unbalanced) to your power amplifier. There are even HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel (ARC) for using the P1 in a multimedia system. Lumin has overcome the main drawback of a digital preamplifier—a digital volume control—by including sophisticated Leedh processing that adjusts the volume with no loss of resolution. If you want music storage, simply add Lumin's L1 external HDD (2TB or 5TB), which is extremely easy to configure. Best of all, the P1's sound quality is superb—commensurate with standalone, bare-bones $10k DACs. The P1's most salient quality is a smooth and liquid rendering of timbre that makes for relaxed listening. Despite the P1's sense of ease, the unit has outstanding resolution of timbre, transient information, and spatial cues. The P1 is a great product and a tremendous bargain. (330)

Bel Canto Black EX

$13,500

This highly sophisticated DAC/preamplifier makes it easy to access streaming services such as Tidal. In addition to being Roon-ready, the Black EX offers full MQA decoding. It even has a phonostage and headphone amplifier. The Black EX also offers special provisions for using a subwoofer and can be controlled via an app. Sonically, the Black EX is highly revealing of details in even the most complex and dynamically demanding musical passages. The extensive digital processing doesn't add a hint of hardness or edge. Even standard-resolution sources sound superb through the Black EX. (290)

Lumin X1

$13,990

After spending time with the X1, SS understood why Lumin is so proud of its flagship. The X1 serves as a streamer, DAC, and digital preamplifier with its own dedicated smartphone app (and Roon compatibility). It supports PCM formats up to 768/32 and DSD to 512 (with upsampling options for both PCM and DSD files). It also supports all the standard formats including FLAC, ALAC, WAV, DSD, DSF, AIFF, and MP3, and will unpack and decode MQA. Streaming protocols supported include Tidal, Roon, Spotify Connect, Qobuz, Apple AirPlay, and TuneIn Internet radio. DLNA and UPnP compliance are also standard. In sum, the X1 does everything you would expect from a premium audiophile product—it looks cool, operates flawlessly, accepts firmware updates, and has its own app. It also performs as well sonically as any streamer/DAC/preamplifier SS has had in his clutches. (300)

Metronome DSC

$31,000

Occasionally, a product comes along that is a true game changer. In the category of streamers, DACs, and digital linestages, the Metronome DSC is such a one. Its secret weapon is banishment of digital noise to a heretofore unheard-of extent. Of course, there's a thick aluminum chassis to reduce RF interference. But the DSC goes a lot further, with an over-sized power supply to eliminate any strain in that department, as well as a top-of-the-line ESS DAC chip that incorporates sophisticated jitter reduction. But the DSC's real advancement is the incorporation of a digital volume control technology called Leedh, which eliminates the noise we've come to take for granted in even the best digital linestages/DACs. Furthermore, the DAC and Roon-ready streaming modules are fully up to the quality of the linestage. The result is an incredibly engaging and gratifying listening experience. (333)

T+A SDV 3100HV

$38,900

The SDV 3100HV DAC is the most feature-laden, capable, and sophisticated digital product RH has reviewed, offering network streaming, Roon capability, FM/Internet radio, Bluetooth, DSD decoding up to DSD1024, and more. It features an advanced upsampling algorithm that converts incoming signals to 768kHz for conversion by the DAC. The unit also has native DSD decoding with an entirely separate signal path built around T+A's discrete DSD DAC. The SDV is a superb-sounding

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Series 3
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Alpha DAC Reference Series 3

Alpha DAC Series 3

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"Magazines naturally focus on presenting to their readers what's new, but it's also important that we don't overlook those previously reviewed products that spectacularly over-perform at their price point. The Berkeley Alpha DAC Reference Series 3 is such a product. I've reviewed all three generations of the DAC and used it as my reference for many years."

Robert Harley *The Absolute Sound* September, 2023

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DACs Introduced Several Years Ago Have Audio Quality Superior To New Modular DAC Designs That Cost Five To Ten Times More. Why?

Unlike other manufacturers who use performance limiting modular construction, our first design priority is audio quality. Period. An excellent example is clocking. Placing the conversion clock extremely close to the conversion device is essential for the best audio quality. That means the conversion clock must be on the same circuit board as the conversion device. With modular designs the clock is a considerable distance from the conversion device on a separate circuit board or worse, in a separate enclosure. The clock signal goes through drivers, connectors, cables more connectors and receivers before it arrives at the conversion device. Unless the clock's full performance arrives at the conversion device it is wasted. That is why Berkeley DAC designs place the conversion clock a fraction of an inch from the conversion device and connect the clock signal using an impedance-controlled transmission line.

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component, rendering PCM with exceptional dynamic verve, tremendous bottom-end grip and definition, and fine rendering of high-frequency detail. This DAC is particularly impressive with standard-resolution files and CDs, where T+A's upsampling algorithm narrows the gap between CD-quality audio and true hi-res. Beautifully built and a joy to use. (301)

Linn DSM/3 Network Player with Organik DAC

$39,000/$7020 (DSM/3; upgrade to any DSM unit)

Linn Products' digital expertise is on full display in the all-new Organik DAC built into the company's DSM Network Player, and available as an upgrade to any generation of DSM going back more than a decade (upgrade price: $7020). Rather than relying on off-the-shelf chips, Linn has created, in-house and from scratch, its own innovative digital-to-analog conversion architecture and circuit. This effort pays off in the Organik DAC's extremely refined timbral smoothness and liquidity. The Organik has a relaxed sound, with tremendous ease and naturalness. Despite the Organik's easy-going character, it is also superb at resolving fine musical details. The treble has a finely filigreed quality that reveals the delicate dynamic and harmonic structure of cymbals. It is the antithesis of the flat, sterile, and airless sound that characterizes much digital, with outstanding resolution of very fine spatial cues at the back of the soundstage. This crystalline clarity contributes to this ability to hear deep into the mix or recording venue. (333)

EXPERT ADVICE
DACS

Overview

- A DAC converts a digital datastream from a music server, disc transport, or other source into an analog signal that can be amplified by your preamp or integrated amp.
- DACs vary widely in their features, size, cost, and intent, from a $100 unit that looks like a USB memory stick to a six-figure, multiple-chassis, state-of-the-art behemoth.
- Some DACs simply decode digital signals input to them (such as from a disc transport or music server) while others include preamplifier functions such as multiple inputs, source switching, and volume control.
- The sound of DACs has improved massively in the past 10 years.
- Today's DACs may include a wide range of features and capabilities.

DAC Features

- Number and type of inputs. Some DACs have two or three digital inputs (USB, SPDIF on an RCA jack, SPDIF on a TosLink optical jack) while others offer AES/EBU and HDMI. The latter is important if you plan to amplify your television sound through your audio system.
- Integral streaming. Some DACs incorporate a streaming engine that allows you to access music from a subscription service.
- Roon Ready. DACs that are Roon Ready are compatible with the third-party music-management app Roon. Roon provides an outstanding user interface on a computer, tablet, or phone for accessing music from a variety of sources.
- MQA compatibility. Master Quality Authenticated is a sophisticated end-to-end encoding and decoding system that provides studio-quality sound to your audio system.
- Preamplifier features. Some DACs provide a full suite of preamplifier features, obviating the need for a separate preamp in your system. These features include multiple analog and digital inputs, source switching, and volume control.
- DSD decoding. Most DACs today can decode Direct Stream Digital signals, an alternate encoding format to traditional PCM encoding.
- Selectable digital filters: A few DACs offer the user the ability to select between slightly different-sounding digital filters.
- Networking capability. Some DACs offer an Ethernet port (or Wi-Fi connection) for connection to a local-area network. These DACs can access digital files stored on devices connected to the network, such as a NAS (network-attached storage) drive.

DACs

AudioQuest DragonFly Black, DragonFly Red, DragonFly Cobalt

$129/$229 /$349

AudioQuest practically invented the low-cost, high-performance USB DAC in stick form with the original DragonFly. It was a massive success. But these three newer models greatly improve on the sound of the original, and the $129 Black version comes at a lower price, to boot. Although the Black sounds superb, the Red and Cobalt are worth the difference in cost. The Red at $229 delivers striking sonic quality, with exceptional transparency, resolution, timbral realism, and wide dynamics. The Cobalt, with its upgraded DAC and processor chips, delivers greater smoothness and resolution than the Red, with a more refined character. Dynamics are also improved, along with a more robust bottom end. No matter which model you choose, you can't go wrong. Add AudioQuest's $69 JitterBug USB isolation device to any of the three and take the performance up another notch. (270, 302)

iFi Zen DAC

$129

The Zen DAC offers a lot of features and high sound quality at an entry-level price. When it is mated with other high-performance components, SS found the results reference or near-reference level, though the Zen does require careful system-matching and quality cables that will likely cost far more than the DAC itself. Ideal users for the Zen DAC fall into two groups: younger, newly minted audiophiles looking for good sound on a budget for nearfield listening; and older ones looking for an inexpensive way to add MQA DAC capabilities and a decent headphone

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amplifier to their room-based reference systems. The former will use all of the Zen DAC's features, while a majority of the latter will set it on fixed output and use it as a basic DAC. Both win. (313)

Schiit Audio Modius

$229 ($249 silver)

In the bad old days, between 1980 and 2000, decent-sounding digital devices were almost universally expensive, to the point that it was generally assumed and often stated by audio experts that inexpensive digital products were garbage unless heavily modified. The Modius balanced-output DAC is one of the latest of the new-generation DACs that challenge that old assumption. It delivers great sound from PCM files and has enough digital input options for most systems, but it does not support MQA or DSD files and has no user-alterable digital filter settings. However, if you want a simple and simply great just-the-facts DAC, Modius fills the bill. (311)

iFi Zen Stream

$399

As you might surmise from its name, the Zen Stream is a streaming endpoint. As an endpoint with both USB 3.0 and SPDIF outputs, the Zen Stream can deliver internet and networked music sources to any DAC with either USB or SPDIF inputs. The Zen Stream utilizes a 64-bit ARM Cortex processor as its platform. Its operating system is an open source, just like a Raspberry Pi, but unlike a Pi, the Zen Stream comes all set up for streaming. For Roon users, the Zen Stream offers an inexpensive no-fuss Roon endpoint, or potential multiple endpoints, as you add additional Zen Streams to different rooms. Zen Streamer may well be the most hassle-free, flexible, and high-quality music streamer currently available. (322)

iFi xDSD Gryphon

$599

Reviewer Steven Stone see two quite different "types" of audiophile as the primary customers for the xDSD. First, younger, more mobile-oriented audiophiles with smartphones and portable computers could find the xDSD to be the perfect "step-up" audio device to improve all their sources' sound. Second, longtime audiophiles (the ones with the 25-year-old DACs that they still love for Red Book) could add an xDSD to their system as an auxiliary digital device that would give them access to all the newest high-resolution files, streams, and digital codecs for a pittance of what they spent on their "main-squeeze" DAC. Both types of audiophile will be pleased and impressed by the xDSD in terms of flexibility, utility, performance level, and overall value. (289, updated to xDSD Gryphon)

Schiit Audio Bifrost 2

$799

The Bifrost 2 is a "True Multibit" DAC, combined with Schiit's custom in-house digital filter. It includes Schiit's new Unison USB, which is its proprietary custom USB input. Schiit took the original Bifrost and gave it some custom upgrades: a new power supply, a new 18-bit Analog Devices AD5781ARUZ D/A converter, and its new custom USB. The Bitfrost 2 accepts formats up to 24/192 for all inputs (USB, coax, optical). Reviewer DK found it was dynamically tight, rhythmically appealing, and absolutely unyielding when it came to source files. It had an unrelenting edge that rewarded quality and revealed every little flaw. Highly recommended for anyone in search of a laser-focused accurate DAC. (309)

Soekris dac1421

$899

Two things jump out immediately about Soekris DACs. First, they're all discrete R-2R sign-magnitude designs. In particular, the dac1421 features a 27-bit ladder, built with

over two hundred 0.02% thin-film resistors. Second, all Soekris products are designed and made in Denmark. The output stage can be switched to either line or headphone output. There are four user-selectable anti-aliasing filters, giving you enormous flexibility in tailoring the DAC's sonic signature to suit your particular taste and system needs. With the digital filter set to soft Butterworth, the Soekris equals or exceeds the performance of TDA1543-based DACs in terms of analog-like sound quality, offering superior imaging, enhanced transient clarity, and superior resolution of micro-detail. In the final analysis, this diminutive DAC and headphone amp delivers superb sound quality and underscores the sonic benefits of a discrete R-2R sign-magnitude design. (311)

Topping D90SE

$899

The D90SE would not exist except for the fact that Topping's previous flagship, the D90MQA, used a top-of-the-line AKM DAC chip. AKM had a catastrophic fire in its factory, which curtailed all its DAC chip production. Topping had no choice but to redesign its DACs to use ESS chips. The D90SE may be a Johnny-come-lately specifications champion from a Chinese manufacturer with a limited track record with audiophiles here in the United States, but SS can only say that, after all his listening, he found the D90SE to be exactly what it purports to be—a well-designed digital audio convertor that performs on a par with reference DACs he has have used in the past. (326)

Cambridge CXN-2

$1099

The CXN-2 provides a good-sounding entry into the world of streaming media without costing a fortune. It is supplied with the Cambridge Connect app, which makes selecting and managing music easier than Tidal's native app. The CXN-2's small front-panel screen is hard to read unless you're up close. The sound quality is a significant step up from the integral DACs in Cambridge's integrated amplifiers, with more space, a smoother tonal balance, greater refinement, and more powerful dynamic impacts. (311)

Chord Qutest

$2125

The Chord Qutest integrates the entire frequency spectrum in a holistic, organic way that just sounds right—not too soft or hard, detailed without being harsh, and relaxed without being flaccid. While I would not go so far as to call the Qutest "analog-like," since that is not necessarily always a positive attribute, I would say the Qutest recreates digital music with a non-digital character that emphasizes its musicality without sacrificing detail or dynamics. And while I did not compare the Qutest with its higher-priced brethren, I did hear that it possesses a certain "rightness" to its sound that I could live with happily for a long time. The Qutest is both neutral and incisive, just like its "best" filter says it will be. If you have a basic but flagship-level DAC that is more than ten years old, and you have been thinking about modernizing I would strongly recommend trying the Qutest before you go ahead and replace your DAC with something with an additional zero at the end of its price tag. (293)

Schiit Audio Yggdrasil+

$2299 ($2399 silver)

Designed by industry legend Mike Moffat, the Yggy DAC sounds very much like the famous Theta Digital DACs that Moffat designed in the 1980s and 1990s—but better. Like the Theta DACs of yore, the Yggy+ has a bold, assertive, vibrant, even vivid presentation. Because of this startling clarity, individual musical lines within complex arrangements are spatially and timbrally distinct. This has the effect of revealing each musical part with greater precision, as well as the intent of each musician—and with that comes a fuller, richer, and more complex presentation of the composition and arrangement. Transient attacks, from a hard-hit snare drum to the most delicate tap on a cymbal, are startlingly fast, defined, and vivid. If you're looking for a DAC that does quad-rate DSD, decodes MQA, offers a volume control, and includes a headphone amp, look elsewhere. But if the very best reproduction of PCM sources is your goal, the Yggdrasil+ is the ticket. It's a spectacular performer on an absolute level, and an out-of-this world bargain. (274)

PrimaLuna EVO 100

$3395

With a sweet, accurate midrange and sturdy construction that should last a long time, this mid-priced tube DAC has a stout tube-rectified power supply for each channel. While that's unusual for a DAC, it assures dynamic range will be wide and dynamic shifts lightning fast. Perhaps the EVO 100 is missing the very deepest lows and highest highs, but there's not much else to quibble about. (300)

Chord Hugo TT 2/Hugo M Scaler

$6725/$5650

The new upgrade of the table-top version of Chord's enormously successful Hugo DAC improves on the strengths of its predecessor. This DAC/headphone amplifier is built around distinctive FPGA-based digital filters that support extremely long tap-length filtering schemes and can thereby make use of proprietary WTA (Watts Transient Aligned) filter algorithms. The Hugo TT 2 is different to and better than the original Hugo TT in every way. It is quieter, yields unmeasurable levels of noise, offers greater dynamic range, provides a different and better power supply, produces much more output power, and incorporates a markedly improved DAC section. In short, everything the Hugo TT could do, the Hugo TT 2 can do better. The Hugo M Scaler, which can be used in conjunction with any Chord DAC, is a ground-breaking product. Basically, the M Scaler is a very powerful digital upscaling device equipped with a >1M-tap digital audio filter. The M Scaler can accept virtually any digital audio file input regardless of resolution or sampling rate and will upscale the input data to either 705.6kHz or 768kHz levels. The Hugo TT 2 and Hugo M Scaler fit together like a sonic hand in a glove; once you hear them together, you won't ever want them to be apart. (295)

T+A DAC 200

$7125

The DAC 200 is the heart of T+A's innovative 200 Series mini-stack. Like its sister components, the MP 200 player and A200 power amp, the DAC is a fully discrete design. There are even separate signal paths for PCM and DSD. And, unlike most DAC-Pre's, the 200 has a true stepped-ladder analog volume pot. Outside, the unit is retro-attractive—cue the dual multifunction meters. Cue, too, the stunningly fast, open, and dynamic sound, which is a dead ringer for that of some far more expensive Swiss gear. Like the entire 200 Series, the DAC 200 is a great deal and spellbinding to listen to. (335)

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Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 3

$10,995

Berkeley's Alpha DAC Series 3 attempts to bring much of the technology and performance of the company's vaunted Reference DAC 3 to a product less than half the Reference's price. The Alpha DAC has the characteristic Berkeley DNA—superb resolution of low-level detail, three-dimensional soundstaging with the ability to hear very fine timbral and spatial information at the back of the hall, dense tone color, and outstanding clarity that allows you to hear individual instruments within the whole. The Alpha 3 doesn't have quite the world-class performance of the Berkeley Reference Series 3 DAC, but it comes closer than you'd expect for less than half the price. The DAC to beat at the price for sheer sound quality. (320)

Brinkmann Audio Nyquist Mk II

$19,990

Brinkmann may be best known for its 35-year track record of making exceptional turntables, but its new Nyquist DAC immediately establishes the company as a major contributor to first-rank digital playback. The Nyquist is brimming with advanced features, including MQA decoding, high-speed DSD support, Roon-ready operation, UPnP connectivity, and upgradeable digital circuitry. Yet for all of its cutting-edge digital prowess, the Nyquist's output stage is built around that most ancient and venerable of audio technologies, the vacuum tube. This marriage produces a sound that is very "non-digital," embodying all the qualities that analog is famous for—dimensionality, treble smoothness, bloom, timbral purity—but coupled with digital's strengths of image solidity, pitch stability, and bass impact. The combination of analog-like warmth, bloom, and ease along with the state of the art in digital connectivity makes the Nyquist an extremely compelling package. (278/301)

dCS Bartók Apex

$20,950 ($22,950 with Class A headphone amp)

The replacement for the vaunted Debussy DAC, Bartók adds streaming network capability to its entry-level DAC. It also sports the latest dCS Digital Processing Platform and Ring DAC technology, originally developed for the Rossini series. Capabilities include streaming over Ethernet from a NAS drive, or from online music services such as Tidal or Spotify, or via AirPlay, as well as full MQA decoding and rendering, plus a much-improved interface and app. Bartók also does the unthinkable: It accomplishes for digital playback what was once the exclusive province of analog playback. That is, it makes you want to listen, and listen, establishing the same visceral and addictive connection that analog does. It's like witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule with no losses from opening transient to the last gasp of acoustic decay. Bartók has a profusion of harmonic body and presence that calls to mind the finest LP playback. Recently, acollection of hardware and firmwareadvancementsknown as Apex was introduced toBartókand madeavailabletocurrent owners. While not inexpensive, the sonic improvements are a triumph of naturalism and harmonicdetailthat will floor even the most jaded audio listeners.(300, Apex review forthcoming)

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3

$28,000

Although the Reference Series 3 looks and operates just like the Series 1 and 2, this reference-quality DAC elevates what was already the finest sound quality extant to a new level. The gains in low-level resolution, ease, and spatial definition are marginal compared with its predecessors, but the Series 3 excels in dynamic impact, bass weight, and clarity, with a greater sense of dynamic openness. Note that the Alpha DAC lacks a USB input; you'll need

Berkeley's $1995 Alpha USB Noise Isolation Interface to use the Alpha DAC with a USB source. (298)

CH Precision C1.2

$36,000–$46,500, depending on configuration

The C1.2 is a uniquely flexible control center that can accommodate all manner of digital inputs: SPDIF, USB, streaming PCM or DSD, and DSD from SACDs via the proprietary CH-Link between the C1.2 and its companion D1 CD/SACD transport. An excellent, optional analog input board is also available. The C1 creates magnificent colors (but never euphony), dynamic fireworks (without overshoot), startling transients (minus any edginess), and jump-up-and-dance rhythms (with zero slop). Nor are spatiality and resolution slighted. The C1.2 also reproduces every dynamic, timbral, and rhythmic flux. And although you can hear every little thing going on in the mix, it all comes together organically—as it does in real life. The C1.2's performance with data streaming from a NAS drive deserves special mention for stripping away the glaze that is all but unavoidable with USB. Best used with balanced inputs and outputs. The newly upgraded C1.2 (not yet reviewed) features CH Precision's latest technology. C1 owners have their units upgraded to full C1.2 status with a renewed warranty for $4000 to $5200, depending on the C1's age. (239)

Ideon Absolute Epsilon

$47,000

The designers at Greece's Ideon Audio have imbued their top-of-the-line Absolute Epsilon DAC with a host of proprietary technologies along with elaborate execution. Rather than use off-the-shelf parts, Ideon has created its own circuits or modified standard parts to achieve its unique performance. Couple this with an elaborate power supply and superb build-quality and you have a top-shelf DAC. When

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auditioned with Ideon's Absolute Stream music server ($19,900) and the Absolute Time master clock ($10,000), the system had stunningly lifelike reproduction of music's dynamics. The sense of immediacy and presence—the impression of nothing between you and the music—was equally impressive. The Ideon trio's vivid palpability brought to mind an analogy with a big horn speaker, with its verve and life. The Ideon's sound conjures an analogy with a perfect crystal—a complete absence of haze, murkiness, or thickness. (327)

MSB Technologies Reference

$54,500 (and up)

JV is an analog man and always will be. But when it comes to ones and zeroes, things have taken a rather dramatic turn for the better chez Valin since the arrival of the MSB Reference DAC and Reference transport. On physical media such as CD or SACD and on streaming sources, the Reference DAC is the most realistic-sounding digital source-component JV has heard in his home, including the dCS stack he reviewed years ago. It is weird that this DAC has turned his head, since it doesn't do three-dimensional imaging and bloom near as well as record players do. And yet, on select cuts from select discs the thing has the colorless neutrality, speed, detail, presence, dynamic range, and delicacy that still make voices and instruments sound "real" enough to raise goosebumps. As a bonus, the Reference DAC renders and decodes MQA, is Roon-ready, and includes a built-in volume control that is absolutely superb, and that, at least with digital material, can be substituted for whatever preamp you're currently using. One of JV's references. (290)

Soulution 760

$72,000

Coming from a company better known for its superb solid-state amps and preamps than for its digital source components, the Soulution 760 DAC was, for JV, the surprise of the 2020 audio season. Indeed, it turned out to be such a game-changer that—if you listen only or primarily to ones and zeroes—he would be hard put to recommend anything else over it, regardless of price, and only the MSB Reference alongside it. Combining a world-class line-stage (comparable to Soulution's own 725) with Leedh Processing volume control (the first DAC to use Gilles Milot's celebrated algorithm) and an ultra-wide bandwidth, ultra-low-distortion, ingeniously phase-corrected DAC, the 760 offers so much more of what JV likes and expects to hear from the best recorded music that it virtually lives in a class of its own. Here, finally, is the whole package—air, bloom, space, dimensionality, dynamic scale, electrifying transient response (on electrifying transients), fabulous low end, and (for once) equally fabulous treble. TAS' deserving 2020 DAC of the Year award winner. (311)

dCS Vivaldi Apex Stack

$140,000

The four-box Vivaldi is the state of the art in functionality and technical sophistication and is in the upper echelon of the best-sounding digital playback. This flagship from dCS incorporates technology unlike that of any other digital product, with all the key sub-systems designed and built by dCS using proprietary hardware and software. It sounds unlike other digital products as well, with a density of information, saturation of tone color, bottom-end authority, and highly spacious yet precisely rendered soundstage that outdo the competition. Although the complete system comprises four separate chassis, not all of them are required. The pairing of the Vivaldi Transport and Vivaldi DAC ($95,500) will get you most of the way there. The Clock ($19,500) and Upsampler ($25,000) are nice additions, but not needed to realize the Vivaldi's extraordinary sound quality. Note that the Vivaldi is a highly sophisticated instrument that requires more user involvement than most digital sources. (268, 333))

Wadax Atlantis Reference

$157,000

Although astronomically expensive, Wadax's 206-pound, three-chassis Atlantis Reference DAC is a cost-no-object exercise in what's possible in digital audio playback. The main chassis is actually three sections combined in an artful way and is powered by two massive outboard power supplies. The Reference is packed with innovative circuitry that is realized with lavish execution. The sonic result is like nothing RH has heard from digital; the Reference DAC has tremendous dimensionality, stunningly realistic timbral rendering, exceptional transient performance, prodigious bass, and an overall presentation that is, by a significant margin, the state of the art in digital. The performance was recently taken to a surprising new high by the newly introduced Akasa DC cables ($20,400) between the power supply and DAC. (312, Akasa DC cable review forthcoming)

Announcing: The Baetis Audio 4-Series

Bringing your Digital Music to Life

"The difference with the new Baetis is far from subtle and my system was awfully good to begin with. Any edginess and harshness is gone, and much, much more 3D. Anna Netrebko was in my music room and scared the crap out of me!" Steve F, MA, Reference 4 owner

"I was amazed at the sound staging. The clarity is improved so much to the point I don't need to use my hearing aids. Can't wait to get back home and listen to my music for the first time." Gary A, CO, Revolution 4 owner

"Sounds great! Thanks for the best-in-the-business customer service" Paul Z, CO, Reference 4 owner

"Multichannel music performance via HDMI was stunning" Andy Quint, The Absolute Sound Revolution X3 review

The Baetis Audio 4-Series: *Prodigy 4*, *Revolution 4* and range-topping *Reference 4*

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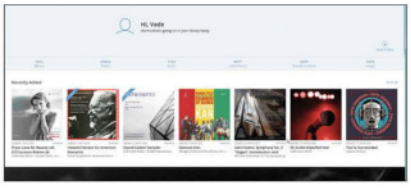
EXPERT ADVICE MUSIC SERVERS AND STREAMERS

- In its most basic form, a music server stores music on internal hard-disc or solid-state drives and outputs a digital signal to a DAC.
- Nearly all music servers today include streaming capabilities, allowing you to access music from a subscription service such as Tidal or Qobuz.
- Some music servers require an outboard DAC to convert the server's digital output to an analog signal. Other servers include an integral DAC.
- A server connects to the internet either through Wi-Fi or Ethernet (the latter is preferred) and also to your local area network where it can access digitally stored music files from storage devices connect to the network.
- A streamer offers all the functions of a music server but lacks integral music storage.

Music Server Features

- Music management app. Servers are often supplied with the manufacturer's music-management app, the interface (phone or tablet) for organizing, browsing, and selecting music.
- Roon Ready. Servers that are Roon Ready can be operated by the third-party Roon music-management app (phone, computer, tablet) that is usually significantly easier to use and more powerful than the manufacturer's app.
- Some Roon Ready servers require that you run the Roon software (called the "Roon Core") on a computer attached to the same network as the server. Others incorporate the Roon Core within the server, obviating the need for a computer.
- Integral digital-to-analog conversion. These servers connect to your preamp or integrated amp without the need for a separate DAC.
- Full preamplifier functionality. Some servers include preamplifier functions—multiple analog and digital inputs, source selection, volume control—obviating the need for a separate preamplifier in your system.
- Some servers with a DAC and volume control require that you adjust the volume through their app or through Roon. Others are supplied with a physical remote control, which in our experience is much easier to use than opening an app to adjust the volume.

MUSIC SERVERS & PERIPHERAL PRODUCTS



Roon 1.8 Music Management, Discovery, and Streaming Platform

$9.99/mo., billed annually; $12.99/mo., billed monthly; $699, lifetime subscription

For readers who are unfamiliar with Roon, it is an application that claims to be "the ultimate music player for music fanatics." Roon accomplishes this in several ways. First, it unites home libraries and streaming services libraries from Tidal, Qobuz, and Dropbox into one comprehensive, cohesive, and completely searchable library. Roon's latest version, 1.8, finally makes finding music, both in your home library and Roon's supported streaming services, almost as easy and intuitive as grabbing an album off the shelves. And while longtime users won't find radical changes in the layout, ergonomics, and playback methodology, they will discover that Roon now uses its troves of meta-data in a far more feature-rich manner. (315)

SOtM sMS-200 Neo Network Bridge

$450

A very small device that plays PCM digital audio files up to 384/32 and DSD256. With a silver isosceles trapezoidal faceplate and a wall-wart power supply, the sMS-200 is just right for a space-limited digital audio player. It lets you store your audio files either on a network or an external USB drive. A software suite called Eunhasu give you lots of software playback options, including the popular Roon (but you need a Roon license). Additional power supplies are available (VF used the mBPS-d2s battery-powered supply). Output to the DAC is via a USB jack. The sMS-200 with Roon was very dynamic, with fully fleshed-out harmonics and excellent momentum. For even better sound, if your space and budget are larger, you might consider the sMS-200ultra and its matching sPS-500 power supply. The sMS-200ultra also has a matching sCLK-OCX10 master-clock generator which is said to improve the sound even more. (Forthcoming)

Sonore opticalModule Deluxe V3 Fiber-Media Converter

$499

The opticalModule Deluxe V3 is a bi-directional fiber-media converter or FMC with a high-precision femto clock. Its main function is to remove jitter from network sources and streams to improve digital sound. As part of a fiber-optic network link, it functions like an EtherREGEN, and can be used on the upstream side with one, with a second OMD, or with an inexpensive generic FMC, as reviewed. Muse Kastanovich felt it made a significant overall improvement to the sonic qualities of all streaming sources coming in from the network. Soundstage, reverb, and harmonics were all more organic and convincing. (322)

GeerFab Audio D.BOB Digital BreakOut Box

$999

GeerFab's D.BOB device promises to allow you to use the DAC of your choice with a Blu-ray, SACD, CD, CDR, or virtually any recognized-by-your-player silver or golden disc, as long as your disc player has an HDMI output. Adding the D.BOB to your system is relatively simple. Merely connect

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Air Phoenix

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Air Dragon V

VooDoo CABLE

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Air Tesla

your player's HDMI output to the D.BOB's HDMI input, and then connect the D.BOB's SPDIF or TosLink output to your DAC. The D.BOB is capable of handling up to PCM 192/24 and DSD64. If you have a large collection of high-resolution discs, the D.BOB gives you a future-proof way to continue to enjoy them into the foreseeable future. (309)

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB Noise Isolation Interface

$2275

The folks who brought us the amazing Alpha and Reference DACs have solved the problem of how to get high-resolution audio out of a computer or music server with the highest possible quality. The Alpha USB is a sophisticated solution to an apparently simple problem: how to connect a DAC to a computer's USB output. The Alpha USB connects to your computer's USB port, outputting a coaxial signal (on BNC jack) or AES/EBU (on an XLR jack) so that you can drive a DAC. The Alpha USB's sonic magic is the result of heroic measures to isolate the "dirty" USB signal from the "clean" SPDIF or AES/EBU output, and the precise, low-jitter clocking of the digital-audio output. The sonic result is state-of-the-art playback of standard-resolution and high-resolution files, exceeding the performance of even the best soundcards. (214)

T+A MP 200

$5900

T+A's MP 200 is best thought of as a CD transport plus a Roon-compatible streamer. There's no DAC inside, but the MP 200 does everything to tee up multiple digital sources—including HDD, SDD, and thumb drives—for a downstream DAC. When combined with T+A's DAC 200, the two act as a single unit. The MP 200 is a superb-sounding streamer, perhaps because it houses the same streaming module as T+A's top separates. Further, the in-house built CD transport rivals the best in the world. Add in a gorgeous, petite form factor, plus great value, and you've got a home run. (335)

Baetis Audio Revolution X3 Server

$6200

The Revolution X3 is in the middle of Baetis Audio's product range, a compact component (13¼" wide) with plenty of connectivity—proprietary SPDIF and AES/EBU outputs plus plenty of USB ports, one of which can be upgraded to an SOtM interface with or without a premium clock card. Supplied with the machine is a beefy Neutrik power cord, a substantial external power supply, 4TB of media storage, and—most critically—customer service that's second to none in the industry. New owners are scheduled for a block of one-on-one instruction to assure that their X3 has been configured according to their wishes and that they know how to use it. Unnecessary "bloatware" has been removed from the Windows OS to optimize sonic performance. (313)

Aurender ACS10 Server

$6500

The Aurender ACS10 was created to be an almost-complete one-box solution. It's a stand-alone digital hub designed to interface with an external DAC via a USB connection. Merely add the USB-enabled DAC of your choice and you have an entire digital front end capable of doing virtually anything and everything a computer/NAS/streamer system can do and more. In essence, it is a dedicated audio computer, but unlike a general-purpose computer, this one has been optimized for music acquisition, playback, and storage. If your goal is to acquire a streamer that will deliver the highest possible level of sonic quality currently available from higher-resolution streaming sources, handle all the ripping and storage, and do it elegantly, you will be hard-pressed to find a better, more comprehensive option than the Aurender ACS10. (300)

432 EVO Aeon Server

$7500

The "432" in this Belgian manufacturer's name refers to the idea that music pitched at A = 432Hz is more enjoyable—maybe even better for your health. The Aeon will change the pitch of whatever it is you're auditioning to A = 432, or to one of several other target tunings. Thankfully, this conversion can be readily defeated, and one still has at his or her disposal an exceptionally versatile and good-sounding digital source. 432 EVO's servers (USB output only) are Linux-based, ready to accept either Roon or the (free) Logitech Media Server as the music organizing and playback software. A wide range of PCM and DSD formats are supported, and there are 10 digital filters to choose among. The Aeon comes with two linear power supplies sourced from the Dutch company, SBooster, one for the SOtM USB card and a second for the rest of the computer. (327)

Fidata HFAS1-XS20U Solid-State Storage

$10,000

The Fidata HFAS1-XS20U is a network audio server (NAS) from I-O Data Devices intended to be used in conjunction with DACs, network bridges, or streamers. In addition to file backup, it can transfer and store music files from computers, USB memory sticks, and hard drives. Approximately the size and shape of a small pizza box, the HFAS1's billet-aluminum chassis shields power and control circuitry from external RFI/EMI. The power and control circuitry are also internally shielded from its two 2TB solid-state drives, which use Fidata's X-Cluster configuration, further mitigating the impact of noise when streaming music. Used in conjunction with a network bridge or streamer/server, the

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HFAS1 allows the listener to hear very deeply into the presentation, undistracted by jitter and noise components that have historically plagued digital-music reproduction. Blessed with a vanishingly low noise floor, the Fidata is exceptionally quiet with a detailed, yet organic musical presentation and gorgeous decay of notes. (318)

Ideon Audio Absolute Time Master Clock

$10,000

This clock from Greece's Ideon Audio operates differently from other clocks. Rather than generate a clock to which all the other digital components lock, the Absolute Time takes in USB from a source (such as Ideon's Absolute Stream) and outputs a cleaner and reclocked USB signal for driving the DAC. The Absolute Time significantly improved the sound of the company's Absolute Epsilon DAC. (327)

Aurender N20 Server

$12,500

The Aurender N20 is the company's newest audio streamer, and slots in one position lower than its $22,500, state-of-the-art W20SE. Beautifully built and finished, the N20 sports a large, gorgeous front display you can read from across the room. Frankly, reviewer Stephen Scharf was taken aback at how good the unit sounded straight out of the box streaming a file from Qobuz, and as it settled and burned-in over the next month it only got better, with greater transparency, resolution, and three-dimensionality. Moreover, music files from a NAS sounded better than the same files streamed from Qobuz—quieter, with a more natural, organic, and fleshed-out presentation. The N20 is clearly designed to "do no harm" to digital music files, and...mission accomplished. If you want a beautifully made audio streamer that supports on-board file storage, seamless integration with streaming services or a NAS, and is a veritable snap to set up, the N20 bears serious consideration. With well-mastered recordings, it consistently delivered some of the best-sounding digital music SSc has ever heard. (326)

Innuos Statement Server

$13,000

This meticulously crafted two-unit server with external linear power supply can run Roon, Roon utilizing Squeezebox, or Squeezebox with your favorite UPnP software. It's built to withstand an Imperial AT-AT standing on it, designed to be placed on display in the MoMA, and engineered to sing at the MET, with a user interface that would delight Jony Ive. From a sonic perspective it checks every audiophile box. Layering and dynamics were unrestricted no matter the musical genre; and vocals were velvety and luxurious, but never high viscosity. Rock was passionately reproduced with snap, punch, rhythm, and texture. Small- and large-scale dynamic shifts were handled with ease. The Statement easily belongs with components at or twice its price. If you're in the market, you would be doing yourself a serious disservice by not placing it in your final list to consider. (306)

Ideon Audio Absolute Stream Server

$19,900

The Absolute Stream connects to your home network via Ethernet and outputs digital audio on one of its two USB ports. These ports can drive any DAC directly, but in the review system the Stream's USB output fed the Absolute Time USB reclocking unit, which in turn drove the DAC's USB input. The Absolute Stream has two USB ports for connecting external USB drives. Ideon supplies its own web-based music-management app, or you can use Roon if you have Roon Core running on a computer that is connected to the network. The customer can specify no internal music-storage memory in the Absolute Stream, or between 1TB and 4TB. Auditioned with Ideon's Absolute Time clock and Absolute Epsilon DAC, the system had terrific dynamic verve, a palpable and immediate presence to the sound, and spectacular bass. (327)

Aurender W20SE Server

$23,000

Aurender's revamped, top-of-the-line W20SE is one of the most feature-laden and capable turnkey music servers on the market. Load the W20SE's internal 4TB of solid-state memory with music, connect one of its many digital outputs to a DAC, link a tablet to your wireless network, and you've got virtually unlimited music. Seamless integration with streaming service Tidal and Qobuz greatly expands the W20SE's functionality, although Aurender doesn't support Roon music-management software. The W20SE's sound quality is outstanding, perhaps in part due to its 1TB internal cache memory, battery power supply for critical circuitry, and other performance-oriented design tricks. Newly introduced upsampling, expanded DSD support, double-isolated LAN ports, and other upgrades in the SE model further improve performance. (W20 reviewed in 258, W20SE in 308)

Taiko Audio Extreme Music Server

$34,000

The Taiko Extreme lives up to its name, with an extraordinary design and execution, including the hefty aluminum chassis and 99-pound weight. Built in the Netherlands, the Taiko Extreme features a dual-microprocessor architecture, one for Roon and general housekeeping software with the second processor dedicated to the music engine. The Taiko Extreme sounds like music without a hint of digital artifact

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and does so better than any other digital source reviewer MC has ever heard. The Taiko Extreme got him closer to what was recorded and the venue it was recorded in then any source but the best analog rigs he's been exposed to. It is expensive, but this is a supreme case of "you get what you pay for." (Forthcoming)

Wadax Reference Server

$59,000 ($76,495 with Akasa optical interface, $129,195 with Akasa interface and Reference PSU)

This crazy-expensive server must be mated to Wadax's equally crazy-expensive ($157,000) Reference DAC to realize both products' performance potentials. That's because the custom, proprietary Akasa optical interface between the two elevates their already state-of-the-art performance to an entirely new realm. But if you have the dough and the significant rack space, there is no better sounding digital front end, in RH's experience. The Server and its optical interface took the system to the next level of timbral realism, soundstaging, resolution, and bass performance. The Wadax pair overcomes so many of digital's shortcomings, particularly in its ability to create a palpable sense of three dimensionality, in liquidity of timbre, and in clarity of instrumental line. The Server's bass is revelatory, resolving pitch, dynamics, and texture in acoustic and electric bass convincingly. Moreover, unique front-panel controls allow you to fine-tune the Server to your system without changing the data. The Server reveals, for the first time, the potential of digital files in that it makes those files, streamed or stored on the integral 2TB drive, hi-res or Red Book, sound like remastered versions. Newly introduced optional Reference PSU outboard power supply replaces the integral supply for yet another level of performance. (326, Reference PSU review forthcoming)

EXPERT ADVICE
TURNTABLES

- Quality turntables range from a $400 unit with integral tonearm and cartridge to separate turntables and tonearms costing six figures, with everything in between.
- The platters of most turntables are driven by a motor directly attached to the platter (direct drive) or by a motor off to the side connected to the platter by a belt (belt drive).
- There are good examples of both, but most high-end turntables are belt driven.

Better turntables are characterized by:

- Speed stability in the platter rotation.
- A high-quality platter bearing for low noise and long life.
- Rigid construction that resists vibration.
- Massive platter for smoother rotation (the "flywheel effect").
- Some turntables are sprung (sometimes called "suspended") and others are unsprung. In a sprung turntable the plinth is mounted on springs to isolate the turntable from vibration.
- Some turntables are fitted with a tonearm that can't be replaced. Others are supplied with no tonearm with the expectation that the owner will choose his own 'arm.
- Some turntables can accept multiple tonearms.

TURNTABLES & RECORD PLAYERS

Pro-Ject T1

$449

The Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB is an attractive entry-level turntable with important ease-of-use upgrades and a high level of fit and finish. It includes a defeatable, built-in phono preamp that sounds very solid, electronic speed switching between 33rpm and 45rpm, and a cartridge pre-mounted and aligned. Unusual at this price, the T1 features a glass

(rather than plastic) platter, and the included felt mat is simple but effective. Setup is as easy as it gets, and the sound is fantastic—especially at this price point. Overall tone is warm-to-neutral with lively dynamics and a lot of heft, particularly on more upbeat tunes. A fun deck and a fantastic starting point. (339)

Pro-Ject Debut Carbon EVO

$599

The EVO is Pro-Ject's upgrade to its popular entry-level deck, and it includes an improved motor suspension, height-adjustable damped-metal feet, dampening material in the interior of the platter, and speed-changing at the flip of a switch. All this was added to an already attractive and quality package, which features Pro-Ject's 8.6" carbon-fiber tonearm. The EVO feels premium and can be tweaked and upgraded for years to come. Rhythm and pace are spot on, and the low end has a pleasant heft. The midrange, particularly brass instruments, sounds tight and sparkles on higher notes. Overall, an attractive, simple, and great-sounding entry-level table. Highly recommended. (316)

Rega Planar 1Plus

$725 (includes Carbon cartridge)

It's notable that Rega's entry-level 'table today sells for roughly the same price it did some 20 years ago. That doesn't mean the Planar 1 performs at exactly the same level as the original Planar 2 or 3, but it does mean that Rega's commitment to value remains paramount. Perhaps even more remarkably, Rega is able to achieve this while keeping all

manufacturing in the UK! Building on success, the P1 uses the classic Rega motor, drive system, and main bearing, but instead of a glass platter this one is made of MDF. The 'arm is the new RB101, which comes pre-mounted with a Carbon moving-magnet cartridge. You won't get much frequency extension or wide dynamics here, but what you will get is the pace, musical interplay, and involvement that make analog special. (171, 295)

Rega Planar 3

$1125 w/o cart; $1395w/Elys2; $1595 w/Exact2

With a phenolic-resin "double brace" creating a "stressed beam" between the main-bearing hub and tonearm mount, Rega's Planar 3 is a significant step forward. Thanks to a phenolic-resin skin and upgraded particulate core-material, the plinth is also lighter than its predecessor, while the new RB303 'arm features a newly designed tube said to increase rigidity. The result is deeper bass, lower noise, more dynamic pop, increased detail, and improved staging. Things get better yet with the optional TT PSU power supply ($375). (224)

Technics SL-1500C-K

$1299

The Technics SL-1500C is a direct-drive turntable with a built-in phonostage. Its shiny aluminum top plate sits on a matte black body of ABS mixed with fiberglass, which Technics says helps with rigidity. The tonearm is the same S-shape version found in the 1200 Series, with adjustable height and an extra counterweight for use with heavier cartridges and headshells. On the back is a switch to defeat the auto tonearm lift, two sets of RCAs, and a switch to change between the built-in phono preamp and the straight line output. Sound is absolutely fantastic for this price point, especially through a separate phonostage rather than the internal phono preamp. Rhythm and pacing are a dream, and bass dynamics really slam. Available in three colors. Overall, an absolute bargain and a pleasure to use. (308)

Rega Planar P6 with RB330 tonearm

$1875 ($2245 with pre-mounted Exact cartridge; $2595 with pre-mounted Ania cartridge; $2895 with pre-mounted Ania Pro cartridge)

The belt-driven unsuspended P6 doesn't deliver the ultimate punch, detail, or transporting emotional thrill of the very finest vinyl-playback equipment, but that's hardly the point or the design goal. The point is that like all the best and longest-lived audio gear, the P6 compels you to play record after record, to revisit music you love, and explore music you have yet to discover. To say that the P6 sets a new standard for Rega 'tables at this price point is not damning with faint praise; it's high praise for what Rega has accomplished—and continues to. (313)

Pro-Ject RPM 5 Carbon

$2199 (includes Sumiko Amethyst factory mounted and aligned)

This isn't a plug-and-play deck—one that you stick on the shelf and forget about. (You could do that, of course, but this 'table was designed to be tweaked and upgraded.) It uses a minimalist plinth that hugs the edges of the big acrylic platter and tonearm board, cutting out anything that isn't necessary. The motor itself sits on a massive, little stage and is entirely separate from the main platter's plinth. This decouples it, making for a much quieter ride. The main platter and plinth are pretty massive themselves, with tip-toe feet that can be adjusted in order to perfectly level everything. In sound, reviewer DK was both impressed and incredibly pleased. The Pro-Ject was at least a match for, if not better than, his own reference deck, and a clear and obvious step up from budget 'tables like the U-Turn or the Rega Planar 1. (295)

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Clearaudio Concept Air Black w/Satisfy Black tonearm

$2500

Beautifully proportioned, light but not insubstantial, Concept Black is a model of how a mid-priced, belt-drive turntable should look and perform. Easy to set up, the 'table works like a fine Swiss mechanical watch, offering overall musicality, tight image focus, transient authenticity, and dynamic conviction. With the optional high-precision Satisfy Black tonearm, mistracking was rendered essentially theoretical, and speed stability was rock solid. Images were locked down with little to no smearing even when the player was challenged by a tightly packed chorus or complex symphonic instrumentation. Weighty in tonality, the Concept Black balanced inner detail and instrumental solidity with the best of them. When it's time to come back down to earth and consider a real-world record player, analog lovers need look no further than the Concept Black. (284)

MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+

$2799

When Mobile Fidelity decided to create a line of hardware, they wisely brought in Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove to design the turntables, and they deliver a lot of bang for the buck. Setup is simple, especially with the "+" option that comes with the Japanese-made UltraTracker mm cartridge preinstalled at the Ann Arbor factory. The belt-driven 'table features an isolated AC synchronous motor, a hefty Delrin platter, and a constrained-layer-damped chassis with feet designed by Mike Latvis of HRS. Sonically, imaging, musicality, pitch stability, and presence emerged as strong themes. The UltraDeck is a smartly conceived and finely honed design that's already earning its place as an instant classic. (284)

Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon

$3299 w/o cartridge, $3799 with Sumiko Songbird High or Low output MC Cartridge

The RPM 9 Carbon is Pro-Ject's "tuner" special, with significant upgrades over the stock RPM 9.2. There's a new motor, a new DC-driven power supply that features an improved AC generator for speed stability, and a newly upgraded platter and carbon-wrapped chassis. Sonics are devilishly good. Backgrounds are jet-black with timbres softly tinted to the warmer end of the tonal spectrum. Arpeggios are liquid and articulate, and there is an impressive sense of air and lift in the upper octaves. With the RPM 9 Carbon's overarching sense of balance across all sonic criteria, LPs sound elegantly composed and well-nigh effortless. Without qualification, this is a terrific package, certain to give a great many lucky owners years of vinyl-spinning thrills. (254)

Rega Planar 8

$3495 ($4145 w/Ania; $4475 w/Ania Pro; $4945w/Apheta3 MC cartridge)

An example of the recent, rapid evolution of Rega's designs, the RP8 is a "skeletal" design, which includes not just the shape but also the material of the plinth—a sandwich of phenolic resin skins over a core fabricated from "featherweight, nitrogen expanded, closed-cell polyolefin." A three-piece, "super-flywheel" platter made of float glass and the newly fashioned RB808 'arm are also found in this (for now) top model. The sound of the RP8 brings new levels of transparency, fine detail, soundstage definition, and drive to the always engaging—now more so—Rega sound, along with a tonal richness, weight, and dynamic thrust that we've never before experienced from any Rega design. In the past, one often qualified a Rega recommendation as "good for the money." The RP8 is simply one of the best mid-priced designs on the market. (234)

EAT C-Dur

$3799/$4599 (w/Jo No.5 cart)

Based on the concept of the top-tier EAT Forte but refashioned in a more compact form, the C-Dur offered analog magic from the first track—articulate and resolved, brimming with sensitivity. Image dimensionality and layering were superb. In tonal character, the C-Dur veered ever so slightly to the mellower side. Detailed and immediate, certainly, but not in an overheated edgy fashion. Compared with some bigger and pricier rigs, the C-Dur was a bit modest in respect to image scale and dynamic explosiveness, and although isolation was good overall, a knuckle-rap on the luscious plum-wood plinth did cause an audible low-level thump. It's factory outfitted with the fine 10" C-Note tonearm and includes a dust cover. For $4599 (a bargain frankly), the C-Dur comes packaged and setup with the fine Jo No.5 moving-coil cartridge. (339)

Dr. Feickert Volare

$3995 (includes Origin Live Silver MKIV tonearm)

Derived from Dr. Feickert's flagship Woodpecker, Volare is an unsuspended belt-driven design that has the essentials down pat, possessing a musicality, stability, and solidity that few LP rigs in the $3k ranks can match. Setup was a snap; it operated silently and achieved platter velocity swiftly. Pitch and image stability were rock-solid. The Volare was unwaveringly stable, reproducing soundstage and dimensional cues and venue ambience in ways that reminded NG of many top-tier rigs. On occasion some acoustic feedback was noted, so a good isolation base is recommended. Volare includes a premium, heavy, well-balanced aluminum platter coupled with a high-torque motor. Fit and finish are superb. (301)

In A World Full of Vinyl Cleaning Options, There's Only One Inescapable Conclusion.

For more than 50 years, the Spin-Clean Record Washer system has set the standard when it comes to delivering the best-value record cleaning solution. Spin-Clean removes dust, dirt, film, grease and fingerprints, while cleaning both sides of the record at the same time. And the Spin-Clean design is simplicity itself – there are no batteries or AC required.

The Spin-Clean fluid is also biodegradable. There are no harmful agents, alkalines, or phosphates, and it's totally alcohol-free. All of which is why the Spin-Clean Record Washer system has been acclaimed by both audiophiles and first-time users alike and cited by independent reviewers as the most effective vinyl cleaning option for the money. Given the investment in your record collection, isn't it time you take Spin-Clean "for a spin"?

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For more information about the Spin-Clean Record Washer system, go to **spinclean.com**.

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Technics SL-1200G

$4299

This turntable, which shares the historic name and appearance of the long-running SL-1200 series but is in fact a new design, offers performance at the very highest level, belying its relatively modest price. (The included 'arm is acceptable but is not quite at the same pinnacle.) Its silence and speed stability are competitive with any turntable available and are far superior to most, even very high-priced ones. The turntable's sound is rock solid, very pure, highly resolved, and very lively in the positive sense. One has very much the sensation of hearing what is actually on the record. The Technics is not the only turntable in its price range (or lower) to have challenged the high-priced world, but it has an important feature offered by few of its high-end competitors at any price, namely, adjustable speed. This is a turntable for musicians and those who share musicians' sensibilities. (274)

Clearaudio Performance DC Wood Air

$4600 ($7000 with Tracer tonearm)

This belt-driven turntable with aluminum/Baltic-birch plinth and ceramic bearing took the listening experience to another level—more fully maximizing their playback potential across key criteria and in many cases extracting and revealing information or details that hadn't previously been heard. What stood out most consistently was a sense of sonic nimbleness and freedom combined with a smooth and steady effortlessness that could well be attributed to the "floating" magnetic-platter design and the lesser number of mechanical parts in the ceramic bearing. Another key difference was the DC Wood's quiet operation—a lowering of noise that carried over through the rest of the system, allowing the proper dark backdrop for full sonic landscapes to unfold. An outstanding, even addictive, analog setup that should be on any LP lover's short list. (DC Wood, 297. DC Wood Air not yet reviewed)

Acoustic Signature Maximus Neo

$4995 (TA-1000 tonearm, $2495; MCX3 cart, $1695)

The Maximus is the entry-level turntable in the Neo line. It's a two-speed, belt-drive design that benefits from the technology intrinsic to its much more expensive family members. Each turntable in the Neo line is outfitted with an individualized version of the Dura Turn Diamond® bearing, which is not only super-rigid for low noise but also exceptionally rugged with a long service life. The spindle is made of hardened stainless steel that is precision ground and then plasma coated to yield a diamond-like surface. Throw in a high-end replacement for the stock leather mat and a good record clamp such as the Acoustic Signature's Grip Mk3, and you end up with a superbly rigid and well-damped vinyl playback platform that sounds far superior to any entry-level table DO has auditioned over the years. (330)

Pro-Ject Xtension 10

$4999 without cartridge, $5999 with Sumiko Starling low-output mc

Pro-Ject is onto something wonderful here: A turntable that hits all the right sonic notes, while providing a rare combination of intellectual and emotional connection to the music. A slightly scaled-down edition of the Xtension 12, the 10 offers a smaller footprint but similar weight. The design features a mass-loaded, magnetically floated subchassis, a 3"-tall, 12.6-pound vinyl/alloy platter, a precision ceramic bearing, and a three-speed AC motor. Regardless of cartridge, the Xtension 10 provides not only a high level of musical satisfaction but does so in a way that delivers a powerful emotional wallop. (242)

Clearaudio Wood Active Air

$5100 (Includes Satisfy Carbon Fiber tonearm and Concept MC cartridge. Smart Power 12V option, $1200)

The Concept Active redefines what it means to be an affordable *and* accessible high-performance turntable in the here and now. Since it comes ready to go, you just plug it in and add vinyl. The Concept Active includes a tonearm and cartridge, of course. But crucially there's also a top-notch built-in phonostage with headphone input and volume control. While Concept Active performed terrifically in a full system, it's hard to downplay the musicality and pure simplicity of listening to it through a good set of headphones, fed directly from the phonostage. What was unexpected was how little resolution the "entry-level" Concept Active gave up in comparison to far more elite rigs. Adding the optional, battery-based Smart Power 12VDC power supply further improved image focus and transient clarity. Overall, the Active is a rarity in the high end: a triumph of performance, pricing, and packaging. (317)

Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas

$5995 (packaged with Cornet 2 tonearm and external power supply, $9995)

Based on the pedigree and designs of the late Tom Fletcher (of Nottingham Analogue fame), the Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas is an advancement over Fletcher's older products. Pear Audio's goal with the Kid Thomas is "sonic harmony." In this case, every aspect of the Kid Thomas' design was tested, down

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- Dean Cacioppo, *Tracking Angle*, June, 2023

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to the smallest parts, in an effort to optimize performance. The act of merging art and craftsmanship with measurements and science allows this turntable package to become a subjectively quiet playback system that can reproduce music in a way that is similar to more expensive turntable systems. (263)

Rega Planar 10

$6345 ($7895 with Rega Apheta 3 mc cartridge)

The Planar 10 is latest top model in Rega's legendary line of turntables. Eschewing traditional mass loading, the P10 uses a very stiff, light, skeletal plinth supporting a ceramic platter and Rega's latest RB3000 tonearm. Braces tie platter and tonearm bearings into a unified stressed member to extract maximal information from the record grooves; an external power supply provides precise, accurate, and stable speed selections at a button press. With the pre-installed Rega Apheta 3 mc cartridge, resolution, tonal accuracy, textural refinement, and imaging are outstanding. Exceptionally neutral, the P10 imparts virtually no coloration of its own. Highly recommended. (317)

Luxman PD-151 MKII

$6490

PS so thoroughly enjoyed using this 'table/'arm combination, from first cue down to last cue up, and was so completely immersed in the music it played, that at no point during the several-months listening did he find himself thinking how much more dynamic, more detailed, more—well, fill in your own adjective and then supply whatever brand you are lusting after. He never *once* thought about any so-called "better" setups he's reviewed in the past. On the contrary, he experienced more sheer joy with the 151 than he's had reviewing a turntable in he can't remember when. One compelling reason for this, quite apart from its intrinsically superb performance, owes to how quick and easy—like 30 seconds or less!—it was to swap pickups thanks to its detachable headshell. The Luxman sent him right back to his salad days as an audiophile, wide-eyed, enthusiastic, and full of wonder discovering for the first time the pleasures of recorded music excellently reproduced. (322)

Acoustic Signature Tornado NEO

$7995

Acoustic Signature implemented across-the-board improvements to its entire turntable lineup: an accumulation of at least 25 years of industry experience, along with the present-day implementation of its innovations in vibration control, platter bearing design, and constrained-layer damping. With these updates, the mostly all-metal Tornado Neo provides a stable platform for multiple cartridges and tonearms to easily show their individual differences and performance characteristics. With an already solid construction supported by the NEO advancements, the Tornado can provide near-exceptional performance in its price class, along with countless hours of musical enjoyment. (326)

Yamaha GT-5000

$7999

You might assume, in this day and age, that a Japanese manufacturer would opt for a digital source in its top component line—or, at the very least, a souped-up direct-drive turntable. Not Yamaha, which was aiming for the truest (to life) sound possible. The result is the belt-driven GT-5000—belt drive being the smoother, more open, more continuous option. On top of this, Yamaha chose to equip its 'table with a straight (rather than an S-shaped) tonearm to reduce skating force. Beautifully simple to use, and elegant to look at, the GT-5000 is not simple in construction, consisting of nine layers for the aluminum arm tube, which is plated internally and externally with copper, then laminated with alternating layers of carbon fiber and glass fiber. Sonically, the turntable is smooth, large in scale, and sweet rather than digital-precise. It sailed through everything AM threw at it, big and small, from run-in groove to run-out. A turntable with soul. (308)

Helius Alexia Turntable and Omega Tonearm

$8790

The British firm Helius' Alexia turntable and Omega tonearm are available separately, but according to the US importer everyone who buys an Alexia buys an Omega, so they are listed here as an ensemble. They represent a combination of traditional and genuinely innovative thinking. A two-speed (33/45) belt drive, the Alexia features a novel suspension that is very compliant in the vertical dimension, completely fixed in the lateral, while an optical sensor below the platter that monitors the speed 120 times per second results in unusually effective speed accuracy and constancy. The Omega's bearing is a uniquely "tetrahedral" configuration that offers "both a captured design and minimal friction." Equally unique is the geometry whereby 92% of the record is tracked with less than one degree of error. Reviewer PS was impressed by the setup's extraordinary stability of pitch, wide dynamic window, and excellent tracking of inner grooves. Detail retrieval is spot-on, imaging and soundstaging precise, freedom from external disturbance superb. (311)

Clearaudio Ovation

$9500 (includes Professional Power 24v linear power supply. $12,000 with Tracer tonearm)

Continuing the trend of bundling together ever more sophisticated turntables, 'arms, and cartridges into fine-sounding but relatively hassle-free combinations, Clearaudio recently released what may be the most ambitious

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yet of such packages. Utilizing techniques found in the company's $14,000 Innovation Wood—such as the light and exceptionally rigid Panzerholz wood-laminate plinth material, and optical speed-control—in a package with the elegant size and ease of setup found in the $2500 Concept, the Ovation, with its magnetic-bearing Clarify 'arm and Talisman v2 Gold cartridge, is a terrific deal. It is very well balanced, with excellent detail that emerges from silent backgrounds, exceptional pitch stability, and sweet, extended highs—though not the powerhouse bottom-end found in the highest-end models. The Ovation nicely bridges the gap between high-end sound and real-world convenience. (216)

Sota Cosmos Eclipse

$10,675 with vacuum

Compared with the open-chassis, suspensionless design of many contemporary models, the Cosmos Eclipse looks restrained and of a bygone era. Nonetheless, it combines attributes that NG finds indispensable—progressive vacuum hold-down, excellent acoustic-mechanical isolation, and a dampened subchassis that is essentially a suspended seismic platform that can endure a San Andreas temblor without a skip. Also available as an upgrade for current Cosmos owners, the Eclipse package comes with Sota's latest innovations, including a three-phase motor, a mag-lev platter, and a new electronics package with speed-control precision from Phoenix Engineering, plus various fine-tuning twists and tweaks. As NG discovered, the performance gains were nothing short of stunning. There's a new league of stability, toe-tapping pace, and profound low-level resolution. The fullest sense of a musical performance in three-dimensions now becomes eerily realistic. A classic from the past has become a classic reborn. (316)

Thorens TD 124 DD

$11,499

This integrated turntable is a fully updated and upgraded version of the classic TD 124 (1957–65), an idler-driven design known for its flow, forward motion, drive, and continuity. Eschewing the idler in favor of a very sophisticated new direct-drive motor, the 124 DD fully lives up to its heritage while exhibiting a bold, exciting presentation allied to a high degree of sonic neutrality, without slighting finesse, subtlety, nuance, and detail. Ergonomically, it lays claim to being the most intelligently realized and thought-through record-playing setup PS has ever used, while its retro styling is irresistible (to PS, anyhow). Although it enters a very competitive retail sector of the integrated turntable market that includes similarly priced models from several other manufacturers, its overall performance is second to none of them and is fully competitive with others costing multiples of its retail price. (337)

AMG Giro Mk.II

$11,500 with 9W2 tonearm

Based on AMG's Viella, the less pricey Giro consists of a circular plinth with an offset platter. The plinth is CNC-machined from aircraft-grade aluminum, and the platter from POM. The Giro shares the upscale Viella's bearing design: "a hydrodynamically lubricated radial 16mm axle with PFTE thrust pad and integral flywheel." The high-mass platter is belt-driven via a stainless-steel machined pulley paired to a precision Swiss-made DC motor. The 9W2 tonearm uses the same unusual and highly effective dual-pivot bearing design of the Viella's 12J2. As with the 'table itself, the sleek black armtube is machined from aircraft-grade aluminum that's been anodized to reduce resonance. Low noise is a key to the outstanding performance here, as this Giro combo pulls a tremendous amount of detail from the grooves. Recorded ambience, dynamic pop as well as nuance, plenty of low-end weight as well as power, and an extended, airy treble offer enough of the illusionary "realness" to make us forget about the gear and become immersed in the beauty of the music. New Mk.II (not yet reviewed) offers a heavier platter with weighted rim, a redesigned two-tier subplatter for lower noise, an improved motor pulley interface and motor mount, and a high-mass armboard. (274)

Basis Bravo with Vector Tonearm

$13,700

The Bravo is the first Basis model designed by someone other than late founder A.J. Conti, whose decades of intense R&D played a huge role in the success of Basis' most affordable rig. The main bearing, platter, motor, and belt are identical to those found in the model 2200. What largely differentiates the Bravo is that it replaces Basis' Resonance Annihilator suspension for a fixed subchassis fitted with solid feet and rubber isolators. The Bravo is also smaller and simpler to set up, with either a blue, red, or black color plate beneath the acrylic plinth. Though it lacks a VTA micrometer and has a few other differences, the supplied Vector 'arm is sonically nearly indistinguishable from the Vector 4. Though the Bravo/Vector doesn't take you as far as other Basis models, it triumphs by bringing the company's purity of sound and connection to the mastertapes to a wider audience of music lovers. (341)

Clearaudio Innovation Wood

$14,000 (includes Professional Power 24v linear power supply)

The dual-plinthed Innovation Wood combines some stunning new innovations along with Clearaudio's ceramic-magnetic bearing (CMB) technology that floats the

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platter, and lightweight yet extremely dense Panzerholz to damp resonances and improve isolation. It uses a massive stainless-steel subplatter derived from the Clearaudio Statement, which when coupled with a new DC motor with optical speed-control, results in superb speed accuracy. JH has not heard any belt-driven 'table, even those with external speed controllers, best the Innovation Wood in this critical area. Solo instruments and voices have such rock-solid pitch stability that you'll swear you are listening to a direct-drive 'table without the motor noise. Music emerges from a black background and has outstanding soundstaging and ambience retrieval when the 'table is mated with a first-rate 'arm and cartridge. This is a terrific analog front end of near-reference quality that raises the bar on what a $14,000 'table can do. (204)

SME Model 12 MK2 Turntable with 309 Tonearm

$14,700

Replacing SME's previous entry-level Model 10A, which also came with the 309 tonearm, the Model 12A represents a substantial leap in performance over what was already an impressive ensemble. It evinces the typical SME house "sound": all but peerless neutrality, deep background blackness, and dynamic range second to none. A powerful new motor effectively banishes concerns over speed accuracy, stability, constancy, and timing, while its proprietary mat/clamping arrangement rivals vacuum hold-down. Not only is the 12/309's sonic performance astonishingly close to that of the company's flagship models, it also receives the same standard-setting quality of build, parts, fit, and finish. Like the Model 10A, the 12A lacks the O-ring suspension-cum-damping of SME's higher-priced turntables, yet PS found its isolation from external disturbances impressive by any standard. The 12A may be the welterweight in the company's lineup, but it can certainly hold its own in the ring with the big boys. (306)

Brinkmann Audio Taurus

$16,990 ($22,990 package includes 10.5 tonearm; $22,590 package includes 12.1 tonearm)

Reviewer AM has had some experience with other big, fancy, expensive turntables. Can he definitively tell you that any of them is better than the Taurus? No, he cannot. Can he say that the Taurus is the best turntable you can buy at any price? Come on. You know the answer to that. Of course, he can't. But the direct-drive Brinkmann manages to combine love and appreciation in a way that few can, and it's a clear step above the finest $10k–$20k 'tables he's heard, fully justifying its status as a reference. It's one of the few products he's reviewed about which he has no reservations. (313)

AMG Viella

$17,500 turntable only with cherry skirt, or black lacquer skirt; $19,000 w/12J2 tonearm ($1500 for Reference tonearm cable)

Like the $15k Raidho C-1.1 (or the now-discontinued $4k Ortofon MC A90), the beautifully machined Analog Manufaktur Germany Viella is that relative rarity—a truly first-rate (and truly original) audio component that, while by no means cheap, is still within the financial reach of folks who aren't made out of money. The Viella may not (in fact, it does not) give you everything that a Walker, TW Acustic, or Acoustic Signature gives you, but what it does supply on select recordings—the extended sense that you are in the actual presence of real performers in a real space—is more than enough to earn the rave review it got and its place on this select list. A genuine marvel of engineering smarts and manufacturing finesse. (226)

Pear Audio Blue Odar

$18,000 w/Cornet 3 12" tonearm and separate power supply

The Odar is the latest and most fully evolved version of the turntable ideas involved in previous Pear Audio Blue designs, involving a heavy platter belt-driven by a very low-torque motor (you need to start the platter by hand), and very careful control of resonant energy. The sound is what REG regards as ideal—very silent in background with unconstrained perceived dynamics, very solid, detailed but without any hint of exaggeration by resonances in the upper frequencies or motor-induced platter vibrations. Forget any misguided idea sometimes expressed that this type of sound is too subdued. What it actually is is correct—and superbly musical in the best sense. A turntable at the outer limits of the possible, without a stratospheric price. (Electronic external power supply with choice of 33 or 45rpm, but no fine speed adjustment). (328)

J.Sikora Standard Max

$19,995

A turntable that is as visually appealing as it is sonically. Few, if any, 'tables in this price range can boast this level of precision machining, which extends to everything from the platter to the weighty damping puck. The result is superlative sound. With the proprietary Sikora tonearm, the 'table delivers effortless and snappy vinyl playback. It also produces a soundstage and bass that are particularly winning on orchestral pieces. Its wealth of impressive attributes mean that the Standard Max cannot be deemed anything other than a top contender. (324)

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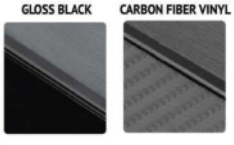

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Technics SL-1000R

$19,999

Technics, long the dominant manufacturer of direct-drive turntables, has now returned its original area of renown with the SL-1000R. And it's a beauty. Simple in design but sophisticated in execution, the SL-1000R provides the virtues of direct-drive without its traditional drawbacks. There is no discernible noise transmitted from the motor to the platter. Instead, the SL-1000R has remarkable fidelity on transients, stopping and starting musical passages on a dime. This precision allows vocals, not to mention acoustic instruments, to come through with excellent tonal accuracy. This simple and elegant turntable makes a strong case for the virtues of direct-drive, one that advocates of belt-drive 'table will be hard-pressed to dismiss, let alone refute. (306)

Basis Audio 2200 Signature

$25,500 with Vector 4 tonearm, reflex clamp, calibrator base, and cable isolation system; $11,000, turntable only

Initially released some 15 years ago, this beautifully crafted and exceptional-sounding record player remains state of the art in its class. Which is doubly amazing given that its designer, Basis founder A.J. Conti, unexpectedly passed in 2016. His widow Jolanta's biggest challenge was finding a mechanical engineer who could maintain her late husband's obsessive quality standards. It took a while, but she found him in Alex Bourque, who, while developing some new products for Basis, continues to oversee manufacturing of the line A.J. developed. Essentially maintenance-free after initial setup, the 2200/Vector is across the board uncolored, transparent, coherent, and seemingly responsive to whatever frequency and dynamic information may be pressed into vinyl grooves. A superb classic. (317)

VPI Avenger Reference

$26,000 (with either JMW or Gimbal Fat Boy 12-3D arm)

VPI makes some great and highly affordable turntables like the Prime Scout, which costs $2200 complete with a really good VPI tonearm. The Avenger clearly outperforms the Prime Scout, but you pay a lot to get these improvements. Since its whole purpose is to do as little to the sound as possible, the 'table is a bit hard to assess. It is one thing to talk about subtle colorations; it is another to talk about a subtle lack of them. A high-end sandbox that lets the user experiment with any configuration he likes—ranging from multiple 'arms (both VPI and other brands) of any length, to different types of motors (belt-drive, rim-drive, magnetic rim-drive) and feet (Signature feet, Avenger Reference Feet, pneumatic air-suspension feet, or third-party feet)—it is a truly versatile and great-sounding choice for those who can also afford (or already own) a top cartridge and phonostage. (287)

Kuzma Stabi M

$26,333 and up

Built like a battleship—black on black in black, all metal in a baked-on matte finish—there's absolutely no obeisance to domesticity in Kuzma's Stabi M turntable, the look strictly industrial. Brutally heavy, thick slabs of aluminum form the outer and inner chassis, with just enough elasticity between to allow for judicious damping without compromising rigidity. Yet in design and philosophy, this is very much a traditional turntable complete with hinged dust cover. The sound is superbly neutral, with very quiet backgrounds, and like all large, heavy turntables in PS's experience, it soundstages with exceptional stability and solidity. There's also a difficult-to-define sense of liveliness about the sonics that is definitely addictive. Ergonomics are unimprovable and operation is intuitively perfect. All in all, a superior platform for your vinyl treasures. (248)

TechDAS Air Force Premium S

$45,000 (with gel footers)

The "sweet spot" in the TechDAS turntable line, the Air Force III, recently got sweeter with the addition of Premium and Premium S models.

The big change is the new precision-cast, surface-polished, solid 64-pound "gunmetal" (a relatively soft copper-tin alloy) platter that replaces the original's 20 pound aluminum one. The compact solid-aluminum chassis is now high gloss black anodized, giving it a more appealing look that contrasts well with the gleaming gold gunmetal. But more important than the visual upgrade, the 100-pound-plus chassis weight concentrated in a relatively small area and the platter's somewhat softer character produce noticeably improved bass extension, greater dynamic thrust, and a pleasing decay finish more reminiscent of the far more costly Air Force models, including the mighty Zero. The optional gel footers (available for older IIIs, as well) are especially useful where floor born vibrations are a problem (Air Force III, 280; Premium S, forthcoming)

TW Acustic Black Knight

$47,500 with TW Acustic Raven 10.5" tonearm

Let's say—for the sake of argument, mind—that you don't have $100k+ to spend on an Acoustic Signature Invictus or a Walker Black Diamond V. What's a body to do? Well, meet the TW Acustic Black Knight. No, the Black Knight doesn't take up the square footage of the humongous Invictus or the sizeable Walker (with pump). But at 143 pounds of Delrin-damped aluminum, copper, and bronze, this gorgeously made, beautifully engineered, three-motor (battery powered and regulated), single-belt-driven, unsuspended 'table is brick-solid—and (when equipped with its dual-pivot Raven 10.5 tonearm) comes a lot closer than shouting distance

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to the mastertape-like presentation of the Invictus or the Walker for about a third of its price. Thomas Woschnick (the TW of TW Acustic) has always made turntables with gorgeous tone color and decay. The Black Knight adds speed and pace to the formula, for a record player that offers the entire package—from starting transient to stopping. One of JV's references. (274)

Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood

$65,000 (includes Professional Power 24v linear power supply, Statement TT-1MI tonearm and black lacquer finish)

The key to great LP playback is lower noise (which equals higher fidelity). The trouble is that mechanical resonances transmitted from turntable, motor, and tonearm tend to fight against this goal, adding distortion rather than subtracting it. Not so with the Clearaudio's Master Innovation Wood equipped with extremely low-mass, near-vestigial, carbon-fiber, linear-tracking TT-1MI tonearm. This brilliant Peter Suchy design not only effectively isolates the drive system from the platter (the main platter "floats" on a magnetic field above the drive platter, eliminating any points of physical contact—and thus any transmission of friction and noise); it also eliminates the inevitable tracking/tracing error of pivoted 'arms via Suchy's equally brilliantly designed linear-tracking tonearm, which rides on tiny bearings, virtually friction-free, along a glass tube. The result is high among the lowest noise, highest-resolution analog signals JV has heard from a record player. The Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood delivers everything—energy, detail, body, tone color—and does so with an even-handed impartiality that makes that "gestalt shift" from hearing sonic "parts" to the shivery feeling that you're in the presence of virtual "wholes" (of real singers and instrumentalists) possible on any well-recorded LP. An engineering masterpiece—and one of JV's references. (301)

Esoteric Grandioso T1

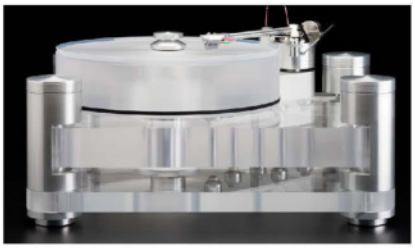
$72,500, turntable only; $80,000 w/TA 9D tonearm; $27,000, G1X master clock

Esoteric's exotic-turntable-market debut surprised even those expecting a "grandioso" entrance from a company known best for its high-performance digital and amplification products. The unique, contact-free, high-torque MagneDrive System produces exceptional speed consistency, accuracy, and background quiet. It's but one feature contributing to this high-mass turntable's smooth, effortless, stand-out sonic performance. Another is the inverted bearing that places the 42-pound, partially levitated aluminum platter's center of gravity well below the rotational axis and reduces to nine pounds the bearing/thrust pad contact weight, which greatly lowers friction and noise. Other features include a vibration-reducing, triple-layer, aluminum-and-wood chassis and a meticulously realized suspension system. Adding the optional 10MHz G1X Master Clock takes rotational accuracy and sonic performance to a higher level. Three-arm capability and seductive looks and sound helped make the Grandioso T1 an instant classic. (341)

SME Model 60

$74,900

A worthy successor to the still-in-production, former "flagship" SME 30 (recently upgraded to Mk2), the larger, moderately higher-mass Model 60 features new adjustable de-coupled feet, and now hidden within the four support columns, a new, more sophisticated vertical and lateral isolation/damping O-ring suspension system. The biggest news though is the new Series VA 'arm exclusive to the Model 60, CNC-machined from an advanced, acoustically inert polymer resin. The new 'arm, suspension and a few other design enhancements work together to produce SME's most sophisticated-sounding, lowest-coloration turntable yet. (333)



Basis Audio Inspiration

$115,000 (includes SuperArm 9, Synchro-Wave Power Supply, Microthin Belt, and Vacuum System; $130,000 with Super Platter)

This remarkable turntable gets its name from Basis founder A.J. Conti's inspiration to bring many performance aspects of his $325,000 Work of Art turntable to a more practical form factor and price. We haven't heard the Work of Art, but we can say that the Inspiration is a spectacular-sounding turntable with many special qualities that elevate the listening experience. Among these are an absolutely jet-black background, superb speed stability that contributes to realistic timbres, a vibrant dynamic rendering, and the uncanny impression of instruments hanging in space. The Inspiration is particularly adept at portraying air and bloom around instruments, as well as at resolving low-level information such as the tail ends of cymbal decays. It all adds up to a highly musical and involving presentation that is, surprisingly, considerably better than that of Basis' superb 2800 Signature. Supplied with SuperArm 9 and Synchro-Wave Power Supply. (220)

Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr. NEO

$122,995 ($150,990 with TA-9000 NEO tonearm)

A couple of years ago, Acoustic Signature introduced a behemoth turntable—the ultra-wide, ultra-deep, ultra-heavy, ultra-expensive Invictus. Quieter and more imperturbable than any analog front end JV had heard up until then, the Invictus sounded uncannily like a tape player. It was just smoother and, to use an HP phrase, more continuous in every sonic respect. Comes now a far smaller, more affordable, and, interestingly, more advanced version of the Invictus—the Invictus Jr., now upgraded to AS's NEO configuration. The Jr. takes technological and sonic advantage of all that

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Acoustic Signature has learned in about half a decade of research. The result is a superb record player for a lot less dough. As is the case with the Clearaudio Master Innovation Wood, if you want to hear singers and instrumentalists sound as if they are wholly "there"— semblances of the real things rather than collections of sonic parts (however beautiful or beguiling those parts may be)—this is the record player for you. TAS' 2018 Turntable of the Year. (297, Neo version not yet reviewed)

TechDAS Air Force One Premium

$155,000 (w/Titanium Upper Platter, $172,000)

As its price (and it has skyrocketed since our review) suggests, this new turntable from the distinguished Asian veteran-designer Hideaki Nishikawa is an all-out attempt to answer and exceed every aspect and parameter of turntable performance. An air bearing for the platter, air suction for the vacuum hold-down, and air bladders for the suspension system triangulate the nucleus of the AF1—the first to combine them in a single design. Special filters and sensors neutralize the ripple effect of pumps and prevent vinyl-damaging vacuum pressure. The sonic results are a background blackness and consequent dynamic range the like of which reviewer PS never before experienced with vinyl—which suggests that spurious resonances are banished and that no hint of feedback or other untoward environmental disturbances pierce the suspension. Paired with importer Bob Graham's latest 'arm, the AF1 is all around the best platform for vinyl playback with which PS has had long experience. (254)

Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence Turntable and SuperArm 12.5

$159,000

The Transcendence represents Basis Audio founder A.J. Conti's attempt to create a turntable that render LPs sonically indistinguishable from the analog mastertape that created the LP. In a departure from previous Basis turntables, the Transcendence is made of stainless steel and various alloys rather than acrylic and features an entirely new suspension system. It is designed as a "forever platform," with the ability to accept up to four tonearms of any length and to have major components upgraded in the field. The Transcendence lives up to its design goal, sounding unlike any turntable RH has heard. What's most striking is how the Transcendence seems to vanish from the playback chain, fostering the impression of hearing back through to the mastertape. Timbres are astonishingly lifelike, with a solidity and tangibility that have eluded other 'tables. The ultra-quiet background and spectacular retrieval of low-level detail combine to render space, bloom, reverberation decay, and the tail end of cymbal strikes with hair-raising realism. The Transcendence also has an ease, particularly on loud and complex passages, that makes you completely forget that you're listening to an LP. When you discover newfound musical meaning in well-worn LPs as RH has, you know that the turntable is special. RH considers the Transcendence one of high-end audio's greatest achievements. Winner of TAS' Overall Product of the Year Award in 2019. (295)

Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo Turntable and TA-9000 Neo Tonearm

$199,995, turntable; $27,995, tonearm

The Acoustic Signature Neo turntable and tonearm are, as their name says ("Neo" is ancient Greek for "new"), genuinely new—and magically improved. Why magically? Because, after living for almost a decade with their predecessors, the Invictus and the Invictus, Jr., JV wouldn't have thought such a major advancement in LP playback was possible. After all, the Invictus/TA-9000 and its young heir were the best turntable/pivoted-tonearm combos JV had heretofore had in-house. They were massive, of course (and that hasn't changed). And they were ultra-expensive (and now are considerably more so). But they were also the quietest record players JV'd heard, and he's heard a lot of record players. Well, here we are, eight years down the road, and Acoustic Signature's Neos have astounded me all over again. You not only hear considerably more of everything that matters through them; you also hear considerably less of everything that doesn't. The RFI, the EMI, the jittery mechanical noises of all those moving parts grinding against one another—which, among other things, tend to flatten body, smear tone color (particularly in the bass), blur detail (ditto), and, with their added emphases on starting transients, make dynamic changes sound sharp and "step-like" rather than smooth and ramp-like—simply aren't there anymore. Even though the original Invicti strongly reminded JV of 15ips tape playback, the Neos come so much closer to that paragon of smooth, solid, continuous, organic high fidelity that it's amazing. JV's reference and nominee for Product of the Year. (339)

TechDAS Air Force Zero

$500,000 (w/Tungsten Top Platter, $550,000)

The Air Force Zero, a 700-pound+ beast devoted to spinning a vinyl platter as unobtrusively as possible, is an immensely impressive creation, a tribute to the ingenuity and seriousness of purpose of its legendary designer, Hideaki Nishikawa. The

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massive air-bearing platter, composed of multiple layers of stainless steel, gun metal, and tungsten, makes the LP itself look positively diminutive. But the sound that this gorgeous belt-drive 'table produces is something altogether different. It can ramp up to dynamic fortissimos that will shake a room, whether the music is a Mahler symphony or a Led Zeppelin tune. But perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Zero is its refinement. There is a sense of ease to the proceedings, a blissfulness that transports it into a truly lofty realm that perhaps no other competitor can quite match. (312)

EXPERT ADVICE
TONEARMS

- The tonearm's major components are the bearing, counterweight, armtube, and headshell.
- The counterweight's position determines the tracking force, or the amount of downward pressure the stylus applies to the LP.
- Most tonearms are pivoted, with a fixed pivot point at the bearing end of the arm, and with the cartridge end of the arm following an arc as it tracks the record.
- The linear-tracking tonearm doesn't pivot, instead moving the entire arm over the LP as it plays, maintaining the same geometric relationship between stylus and groove at any disc radius (and also the same stylus/groove relationship as the cutting head that made the record).
- The tonearm should have low friction in its bearings and be well damped to resist vibration.
- The two common types of bearings are the gimbal and unipivot. In a gimbaled bearing, two sets of bearings are oriented at 90° to each other, much like in a navigational gyroscope.
- In a unipivot, a hollowed-out cup in the 'arm rests on a sharp point.
- Gimbaled bearings should be tight enough to avoid "chatter" (unwanted movement), but loose enough to have low friction.
- Traditionally, tonearms have been 9" in length, but there's been a recent trend toward 12" models.
- A 12" tonearm has lower tracking error but higher mass.

TONEARMS

Rega RB330

$675

For decades, turntable manufacturers who didn't build their own 'arms frequently packaged their models with Rega's terrific-sounding and affordable RB300 tonearm. Musically compelling, with excellent balance and good detail, if not the final word in any one category, the improved RB330 is still a superb buy. (127)

Acoustic Signature TA-1000 NEO

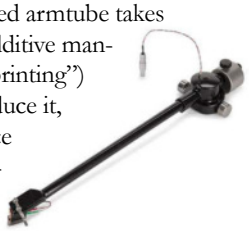
$2495

One of Acoustic Signature's best sellers, this 9" tonearm features a dual-layer carbon arm tube and precision miniature ball bearings. It provides for adjustable VTA, azimuth, and anti-skating force. VTF is adjustable via a brass counterweight. The 'arm is available in both SME and Rega mounting styles and is a perfect match in terms of effective mass (9.3g) and cartridge balance range (6 to 16g) for most mc cartridges. It was reviewed with the Acoustic Signature Maximus Neo turntable and Acoustic Signature MCX3 moving coil. Tonearm installation is greatly simplified by the inclusion of an excellent alignment tool that allows for precise setting of the spindle-to-pivot distance, as well as adjustment of cartridge overhang and offset angle. This combination is detailed yet easy to listen to. Reproduction of violin overtones is pure and sweet, while soundstage transparency is superb. An antidote for bright or otherwise hyped-up recordings. (331)

VPI JMW 12-3D

$2500

A 12" tonearm intended for the Avenger turntable, the 12-3D is VPI's newest 3D-printed design. It has a structure that is so well damped it has less than 1.5dB of resonance in the critical 9–12Hz range. The 3D-printed armtube takes its name from the additive manufacturing (or "3D printing") process used to produce it, creating a single-piece structure from headshell to rear stub designed and made to provide a totally even mechanical resonance response. (285)



Helius Designs Omega Silver Ruby

$5225, 10" ($5295, 12")

Designer Geoffrey Owen has significantly advanced his tetrahedral bearing design, which uses twelve large rubies to produce a captured bearing with extremely low friction and single-point contact on all surfaces. This dynamically balanced 'arm with non-coincident bearings provides a very stable mechanical platform for a wide range of cartridges without adding its own coloration. While it is not the last word in ease of setup, and lacks adjustable VTA during play, the Omega Silver Ruby's ability to reproduce a rock-solid, precise, and complete soundstage, without truncating the rear of the stage, is reference quality. It has exceptional tonal neutrality and clarity across the sonic spectrum, with

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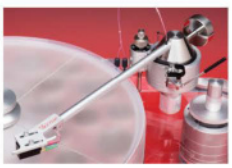
deep, dynamic, and articulate bass without bloat or overhang, and naturally extended highs without any stridency. (204)

Tri-Planar Mk VII

$6200

Originally designed by Herb Papier, the Tri-Planar has been built under the well-trained leadership of Tri Mai for over a decade. (Tri was Papier's handpicked successor and bought the company from his mentor before Papier's death.) And while it's hard to improve on greatness, Tri Mai's latest thoughts on this classic of tonearm design have, indeed, improved on Papier's final version. While it was always well built, the Mk VII edition is better finished than ever before. Tolerances have been tightened from 0.001 to 0.0001 on all critical parts, and more environmentally friendly materials are employed throughout: lead in the damping trough and headshell has been replaced by an alloy with similar weight and properties, and the brass counterweights have been changed to surgical-grade stainless-steel to increase longevity. In addition, the armtube has eight layers of internal damping, the new VTA-gauge is laser-etched (rather than silk-screened), and there's a new micro-weight at the rear of the counterweight mounting-tube. If earlier models were characterized by tremendous solidity, focus, dynamic agility, bottom-end reach, overall neutrality, and transparency to the source, then this 'arm has all that multiplied by many degrees. (191)



Basis Audio Vector Model 4

$8200 ($9500 with VTA micrometer)

Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—dynamic azimuth error. (Azimuth is the perpendicular relationship between stylus and groove.) Rather than allowing the 'arm to "roll" when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via asymmetrical weighting, so that it "leans over" onto a second bearing. The result is an extremely neutral-sounding 'arm that RH has yet to hear mistrack. Although auditioned only on Basis 'tables (the 2200, 2800, and Inspiration), the Vector 4 is tonally neutral, dynamically alive, and rich in timbre. When playing records, the 'arm is perfectly silent, with no "talk" or "chatter" emanating from the tonearm itself. Beautifully built and finished, each Vector's pivoting mechanism is personally assembled. (172)

Kuzma 4Point

$10,000 ($11,691, bi-wire w/Cardas RCA box)

Like the Kuzma Airline straight-line-tracking air-bearing 'arm, to which it bears a strong sonic resemblance, the Kuzma 4Point pivoted tonearm is a veritable paragon of high resolution. An ingenious design that is immaculately well made and simple to install and adjust (VTA, VTF, azimuth, overhang, anti-skate), the 4Point uses a unique four-point bearing (thus, the name). A sonic vacuum cleaner when it comes to recovering low-level detail (some of which other great tonearms simply miss), the 4P is slightly leaner in balance than its chief competitors (such as the Walker Audio air-bearing, linear-tracking tonearm and the Da Vinci Master's Reference Virtu); nonetheless, the differences among them are relatively small. The bottom line here is that the Kuzma 4Point is an exceptional performer—almost unbelievably good for the dough—and easily earns JV's highest recommendation, particularly if you are a "fidelity to sources" kind of listener. (225)

Klaudio KD-ARM-AP12

$19,999

Combining the attributes of a pivoted tonearm with a traditional linear-tracking tonearm, Klaudio has created a uniquely functional pivoted/linear-tracking KD-ARM. The 'arm's tangency is true to that of a traditional linear tracker, yet it provides the mounting convenience of a pivoted 'arm and its sometimes improved bass performance. This combination, when set up properly, yields excellent performance from top to bottom. With smooth operation, a host of expected adjustments (VTA/SRA, VTF, azimuth, and linear tracking zero-overhang calibration), smooth handling and operation, along with the ability to quickly switch cartridges via a removable headshell (including SPU-type cartridges), the KD-ARM combines flexibility with sonically satisfying attributes. (328)

Kuzma Safir

$22,250

Kuzma's most costly pivoted arm, featuring a "lab-grown" sapphire arm tube, is by far designer Franc Kuzma's best sounding. Its resonance-free bottom-octave performance puts it, regardless of price, well above most competition. Once you hear it, the differences will be clear between solid, deep bass emanating from the grooves and arm-tube resonance-added "bass." The unique "4 Point" bearing system—four hardened steel points sitting in jeweled cups— resulting in very low friction, zero "play," and little or no bearing "chatter"—is enhanced here by a high-mass solid aluminum and brass block structure supporting the points and sapphire tube. Unlike other Kuzma 4 Points, the Safir's headshell is not removable, making it somewhat less convenient, but once you hear it, you'll not likely care. Fully adjustable in all set-up parameters though not VTA/SRA-adjustable "on the fly." Listen and you won't miss that either. (338)

Basis Audio Superarm 9

$25,000 (12.5" version, $36,000, 16" version, $45,500)

Although Basis Audio's Vector IV tonearm is outstanding, the company's Superarm 9 plays in an entirely different league. This 'arm's ultra-low resonance gives it a relaxed ease, particularly through the

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midrange. Instrumental timbres are clean, liquid, and free from glare. One listen to vocals through the Superarm 9 and there's no going back. Fine details are vividly brought to life, particularly transients, giving the presentation greater density of information without added forwardness. The bass is phenomenal, combining great heft and weight with dynamic agility. A reference-quality tonearm. (264)

Acoustic Signature TA-9000 NEO

$27,995 (9" tonearm)

An ingeniously designed and elaborately constructed aluminum tonearm with a near-friction-free space-age bearing and a unique, branch-like internal structure (made via an expensive and time-intensive SLM process) that provides superior damping without adding excess mass, the TA-9000 is the most transparent pivoted tonearm JV has used or reviewed. Imperturbable tracking, exceptional neutrality, unexcelled resolution (in a non-linear-tracking tonearm), and superb dynamics make this marvel of German engineering a must-audition for any LP lover with pockets deep enough to afford it. (339)

Swedish Analog Technologies CF 1-09

$62,000

The SAT CF 1-09 tonearm is, as the Brits like to say, a serious piece of kit. It's exquisitely fabricated by a process that includes grafting layers of carbon fiber upon each other to ensure a tonearm of great rigidity that is as impervious as possible to vibration. Marc Gomez, the designer of the tonearm, has gone to heroic lengths to ensure that the stylus can track the grooves of an LP with scant perturbation. The darned thing is simply so inert that it manages to excavate tiny nuances and details that were previously obscured, as well as offer huge dynamic swings. There is nothing quite like hearing a full brass choir on a Verdi overture or Strauss tone poem the way the SAT can render it. Anyone seeking full-spectrum sound from his tonearm need look no further than Gomez's wizardry. Priced in euros to avoid exchange-rate fluctuations. (300)

EXPERT ADVICE
PHONO CARTRIDGES

Overview

- A phono cartridge converts the groove modulations in an LP to an electrical signal.
- Phono cartridges come in two varieties, with their names describing how they produce an electrical signal—moving magnet and moving coil.
- In a moving-magnet cartridge, the coils are fixed, and tiny magnets attached to the cantilever (the thin post protruding from the cartridge that holds the stylus) move in response to groove modulation.
- In a moving-coil cartridge, the magnets are fixed, and the coils move.
- A third type of cartridge, the optical cartridge, works on an entirely different principle (using light rather than magnets and coils) and is making a strong move into the market.
- Other less-common cartridge types include the strain-gauge and moving-iron cartridges.

Cartridge Output Levels

- Cartridges vary greatly in their output levels, particularly between moving-magnet and moving-coil types.
- Moving-magnet output levels range from about 2mV (two thousandths of a volt) to 8mV.
- Moving-coil output levels range from about 0.15V to 2.5mV.
- The amount of gain required of the phonostage varies greatly between moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, but also between models within a type.

Cartridge Miscellany

- The stylus should be cleaned before every record with a stylus brush, moving from back to front in the same motion of the record beneath the stylus.
- Precise alignment of the cartridge in the tonearm is crucial to achieving the best performance. Use a simple alignment protractor or invest in the more advanced alignment tools available.
- The stylus wears out after about 1000 hours of use. Most cartridges can be "re-tipped" by the manufacturer.
- Moving-coil cartridges should be demagnetized periodically to remove residual magnetic fields in the coils. Demagnetizers are inexpensive, and sometimes even built into a phonostage.
- Do not attempt to demagnetize a moving-magnet cartridge; it will render the cartridge useless.
- Stylus shapes vary, with the least expensive cartridges having a conical or round tip. Better cartridges feature an elliptical stylus or a more advanced shape such as fine-line, line-contact, Shibata, van den Hul, and hyper-elliptical. Elliptical styli more closely approximate the shape of the cutting head for greater fidelity.
- Cantilevers can be made from boron, diamond, titanium, and sometimes exotic composites.

PHONO CARTRIDGES

Ortofon 2M Red

$99

The swansong design of Ortofon's former chief engineer Per Windfeld, the entry-level 2M Red uses an elliptical-tipped stylus. Though a little dry in the treble and lacking the Ortofon Black's velvety finesse and harmonic finish, the 2M Red is still one sophisticated cartridge for the money. (182)

Audio Technica VM540ML and VM760SLC

$279 and $649

These two pickups are grouped together because they are part of A-T's VM line and despite the price gap sound far more alike than different. Judged according to the highest standards, PS found they acquitted themselves astonishingly in every aspect of performance, including frequency response, tracking ability, transparency,

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and dynamic range. Their only tonal anomaly is a smooth, mild rise beginning at 5kHz to a maximum of 4–5dB at 11kHz–12kHz, which in the listening is remarkably benign and might even pass unnoticed in many systems (and is easily correctable with a treble tone control). Otherwise, both cartridges are neutral and extremely involving, proving moving magnets can come as close as moving coils to the absolute sound. Under really critical listening, the 760 suggests subtly better dynamics, detail, and nuance, and it is now one of PS's references. But both these models are real giant-slayers: spend little, get lots—but lots—in return. (284)

Shure V15 Type VxMR with JICO SAS/B Replacement Stylus

Price varies; replacement stylus assembly $282

It will no doubt seem curious to recommend a product discontinued a quarter century ago. But used samples of this classic moving magnet are easily acquired at reasonable prices on the second-hand market; now, thanks to the Japanese firm JICO, you can have in effect a brand-new pickup, owing to JICO's SAS/B replacement stylus. All things considered, PS knows of no other phono pickup, mc or mm, that offers quite the combination of features and beautiful sound in the way that tonal neutrality typically guarantees, yet that is also transparent, engaging, and involving, and that still tracks better than any other in his experience. There's also the cachet of having an important piece of audio history that is far from irrelevant or left at the post in today's world. PS is glad he has one and wouldn't trade or get rid of it for the world. (334)

Grado Opus3

$300 (both high- and low-output versions)

Grado's entry-level offering in its new Timbre Series was a little like going home again to a pre-digital age. With its midrange tonal richness, unvarnished musicality, and warmer overall signature, this was classic Grado. There were still notes of dark chocolate in its voicing—a complex, bittersweetness, which favors highly resonant wood instruments like cello and acoustic bass and winds like clarinet, oboe, and bassoon. The primary strength of the Opus3, however, is its way with timbral distinctions, its verdant naturalism, and its harmonic balance. Purely and simply, a celebration of LP playback. (313)

Denon DL-103, DL-103R, DLA-2200

$349, $ $499, $599

Despite nomenclature and pricing, these are essentially different versions of the same pickup, hence their being grouped together. The DL-103 is the base model, manufactured exactly the same way since its introduction in 1962—by hand. It also enjoys a longer life without modification than any other phono cartridge in the history of audio, while also being one of the most beloved audio products ever made. The DLA-220GS, marketed as a special edition to commemorate Denon's 110th anniversary, is merely a 103 installed in an exclusive silver-graphite universal headshell and boxed in a fancy leather case. The DL-103R is a 103 with 6N copper wire for the coils, a finer wire made from a purer grade of copper, the sonic result a slightly reduced extreme top end for a fractionally darker presentation that is nevertheless very pleasing albeit not quite so accurate as the stock 103. Regardless of which version you buy, you will still get all the virtues that account for its 60-plus years of popularity: natural, supremely musical tonal profile; a presentation dynamically, vibrantly, intoxicatingly *alive*; body, dimensionality, and solidity with outstanding soundstaging and imaging; a connectedness that makes for a gripping sense of flow and drive; and sample-to sample-consistency and reliability that should be the envy of the industry. These pickups are now among reviewer Paul Seydor's top references. (328)

Ortofon MC Quintet Red

$399

At just under three-hundred bucks, the Quintet Red (0.5mV) is on the lowest end of the price scale for moving-coil cartridges, but it doesn't sound like a cheapskate. Its transient speed and sure-footed tracking make it a slam-dunk for any thoughtful starter system. It lacks some resolution of micro-detail and tonal purity at the frequency extremes yet retains the distinctive musicality that is the essence of LP playback. (244)

Excel Sound Corporation Hana SL

$750

In a sea of $10,000-ish super-cartridges, what's a vinyl-playing audiophile with discriminating tastes to do? For that matter, what's a sub-$999-budgeted audiophile to do? The $750 Hana SL is a cartridge that establishes a baseline of fundamental performance that any cartridge costing more coin should equal, without falling backwards in any area this cart provides. With the Hana SL, the user can rest assured the cartridge will support the next 'table/'arm upgrade. It represents the qualities any more costly cartridge should offer as a bare minimum—and that some don't. (270)

Ortofon MC Quintet Black

$1099

The Quintet Series is a lineup of five low-to-mid-priced moving-coil cartridges that replaces the aging Rondo Series of mc's. At the top rung is the 0.3mV Quintet Black, which is given the royal treatment with niceties like neodymium magnets, a nude Shibata stylus, and a boron cantilever. Sonically, the Quintet Black displays a settled, even neutrality across the tonal spectrum with glimmers of midrange warmth. It has both a light touch and a commanding sense of control. Violin harmonics are fluid and airy, and low-level information is illuminated with greater precision than it is with the Quintet Black's moving-magnet cousin, the excellent 2M Black. (244)

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Clearaudio Maestro Ebony V2

$1500

The successor to the redoubtable Maestro Wood, the Maestro V2 Ebony sports a higher 4.2mV output. It uses an ultra-low-mass Micro HD stylus mounted to a solid boron cantilever and an overall assembly that's identical to those used on its upper-crust moving-coils. Tonally it hews straight down the rich-and-wide middle of the sonic spectrum. Its innate midrange energy and overall balance bring symphonic recordings to life unifying each section into the greater whole of the orchestra. Low-level detail is elegantly resolved. There's a lightness and speed in the way it reproduces transients. The Maestro Ebony has shed some of its predecessor's excess warmth for a more faithful and quicker sound. As musical as they come, the Maestro V2 Ebony should be required listening for mm and mc fans alike. (234)

Lyra Delos

$1995

According to the designers at Lyra, the problem with "conventional" moving coils is that optimal alignment occurs only with the cartridge at rest, i.e., not playing. As soon as a stylus hits the groove and tracking force is applied, that delicate balance is thrown off, compromising resolution, tracking ability, and dynamic range. To solve this issue, the body of the Delos has an unusually shallow angle, and asymmetrically cut dampers on the suspension system. With the cartridge at rest and no tracking force applied, the shape of the asymmetrical dampers puts the signal coils and core into a more upright angle than the magnetic circuit. The resulting uniformity during playback improves dynamics, tracking, and resolution, and removes the guesswork associated with proper azimuth and VTF. An exceptionally quiet background is the most immediately striking aspect of this design. It is also very well balanced and notably coherent across the spectrum, tonally natural, texturally rich, and very quick of response. (206)

Clearaudio Charisma V2.1

$2200

Clearaudio's literature describes the Charisma V2 as founder Peter Suchy's "moving magnet masterpiece." It has tonal vibrancy and complexity, classic midrange heft and bloom, dynamic electricity, and top-end sweetness. Tracking is unshakable and effortless, and transient cues are reproduced with unalloyed naturalism. The Charisma also retrieves images like they're being monitored by LoJack. Premium features include the same boron cantilever and double-polished Gyger S stylus found in the Goldfinger Statement mc, with the motor housed in a mass-loaded ebony wood body for added resonance control. Output is a real-world 3.6mV. Like its name implies, you've either got it or you haven't. This cartridge has got it. New 2.1 is equipped with new Prime Line stylus from Ogura Japan. (V2 reviewed, 284. V2.1 not yet reviewed)

DS Audio 003

$2500 (003 equalizer $3500)

Having set new standards of fidelity in the ultra-high end with his POY-winning $15,000 Grand Master optical cartridge (and $45k, two-box Grand Master equalizer), DS Audio's ingenious Tetsuaki "Aki" Aoyagi has turned his attention to the rest of us. The $2500 DS-003 ($6k with its matching DS 003 equalizer) is a "trickle-down" masterpiece. Using many of the technical innovations first found in the Grand Master (such as a dual-mono optical generator with independent LEDs and photo detectors for each channel and a beryllium "shading plate," which reduces moving mass to 1/10th that of a typical moving-coil cartridge), the "third-generation" 003 sounds almost exactly like a slightly less finely detailed, slightly less spacious Grand Master. Standard-settingly quiet, explosively dynamic, and robustly rich in color, the DS 003 makes opting (or optical'ing) for a new-tech oc a lot easier (and a lot less of a trade-off) than it once was. (330)

Hana Umami Blue

$2500

A damped blue body, solid Boron cantilever, nude microline stylus, cryogenic treatment (front and rear yokes, pole piece, and 24-karat gold-plated terminals), and an Alnico-magnet-based moving-coil generator with pure copper hand-wound on a Permalloy armature make up the core of this wonderful-sounding cartridge. All-around excellent, some of its standout virtues include its ability to swing dynamically from micro to macro while staying linear as it traverses levels in between. The Blue has a more illuminated character than other Hana cartridges, which moves it closer to neutral without crossing the line into analytical. The Blue traces and tracks the grooves surefootedly on complex passages, conveying a high level of transparency, harmonic complexity, speedy note-transitions, and timbral richness. It is a flash of "Blue" lightning at its price point. (341)

Ortofon MC Cadenza Bronze

$2689

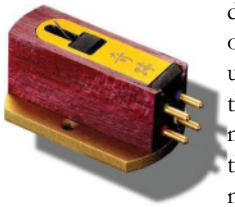
Orfoton's Cadenza Series replaces the Kontrapunkt line, but with a difference, tailoring each model to cater to specific tastes in sound. One down from the top of the series, the Bronze is designed to have a slightly warmer, more romantic sound suited to classical music, acoustic jazz, voices, and so forth. And so, it proved in PS's evaluation, though the tailoring is pretty subtle, which means that the Bronze is still very much an Ortofon as regards overall neutrality and other things, including transparency, tracking ability, dynamic range, resolution, and the like. If you almost love the peerless neutrality of the best Ortofons (such as PS' reference Windfeld) but want something just a tad richer, the Bronze might be just the ticket. For PS it's a pickup that boasts

the highest neutrality of any transducer he's heard with a designed-in flavor and is one of his top recommendations in carts costing under $3000. (232)

Kiseki Purple Heart NS

$3199

The "new" and most recent Kiseki Purple Heart captures all the magic of the original—and then some. At the same time, the newest version is quite different from the original. While they both use boron cantilevers, the latest has a different mounting method for the diamond, and on the newest version the coils are wound from gold instead of OFC. The new Kiseki also uses an innovative method of winding the coils that is said to increase transient speed and frequency extension, while also eliminating any sense of harshness and sibilance. Kiseki in Japanese means "miracle" and it is a fitting name to associate with the Purple Heart NS. This moving-coil cartridge is relatively easy to drive, tracks everything thrown at it, has a relaxed yet detailed sound, and when mated with superb speakers puts the performers in the listening room. (306)



Ortofon MC Cadenza Black

$3359

This standard-mount, low-output (0.3mV) moving-coil cart features a nude Shibata stylus with a thin, stiff boron cantilever yielding an extremely low-mass stylus/cantilever system for enhanced fine detail retrieval and tracking. The Cadenza Black brings a lot of the advanced technology found in Ortofon's more expensive carts, like the MC A95 and MC Anna, to a more affordable price, including its patented Wide-Range Damping (WRD), which effectively controls high- and low-frequency damping separately, its Field Stabilizing Element (FSE) to keep the magnetic field stable and consistent regardless of armature movement, and its Aucurum gold-plated 6NX copper wire. Here's a fast, tonally balanced, low-coloration cartridge that has outstanding transparency, tonal neutrality, and openness without any brightness or stridency, plus very good soundstaging and dynamics. It approaches the sound of a mastertape and is a great value! (232)

Miyajima Infinity Mono

$3475

The Infinity represents Miyajima's attempt to push the boundaries of mono reproduction one step beyond its previous flagship Zero cartridge. Its attempt has succeeded. The bulbous Infinity weighs in at some 6.4 grams, but the increase in size and weight from the more diminutive Zero do not in the slightest detract from its performance. Rather, they enhance it. The Infinity not only extracts more information from the grooves than the Zero but is also smoother and more extended in the treble. For anyone interested in playing mono LPs, the Infinity is a must-audition. (309)

Hana Umami Red

$3950

Designed by Excel Sound Corporation's Masao Okada-san, the Hana Umami Red has a gorgeous-looking, glossy red, traditional Japanese Urushi lacquer finish with a front inlay of ebony wood. From a sound perspective, this cartridge has exceptional balance that allows the musical timbre of instruments and vocals to present themselves truthfully with realistic integrity. If you couple these attributes with excellent micro/macro-dynamics, the ability to unravel harmonic complexity, an ever-so-slight tilt toward warmth, and smooth yet extended high frequencies, you have an excellent transducer. The Umami Red is the best sounding cartridge to come from the Excel factory, and reviewer AJ has heard a number of them, including some expensive OEM models. At its price point, the Umami Red provides deliciously enjoyable class-leading performance compared with cartridges in the same price range. (319)

Soundsmith Paua MkII ES/Sussurro MkII ES

$3999/$4999

These two moving-iron cartridges from Soundsmith's Peter Ledermann are essentially identical save for their bodies and styli. The Sussurro uses a specially selected "Contact Line Nude, 0.100mm SQ stylus" and the Paua a somewhat less highly select nude contact line. Ledermann indicated that the Sussurro would be more revealing and the Paua slightly more forgiving and "musically natural." Our reviewer, AHC, liked them both but marginally preferred the Sussurro precisely because it was just a bit more revealing of micro-detail, subtle soundstage information, and ambience. "It was their consistent ability to get things musically right," said AHC of both cartridges, "and to get the most out of most LPs that impressed me." (219)

Sumiko Palo Santos Celebration

$4499

The Palo Santos Celebration is Sumiko's elegant, flagship moving coil (0.5mV). Essentially midrange-neutral, its signature subtly veers to the full-blooded and warmer end of the spectrum, with just a hint of upper-treble shading. In order to appreciate its presence and conservatively tailored character, listening to pure, unamplified, acoustic music is a must. Only in minor ways does it leave some performance on the table, flagging ever so slightly in bottom-end resolving power or in imparting orchestral air and bloom. Still this beauty draws you into its naturalistic web and conveys complexities of timbre and space that are nothing short of authentic. (206)

Koetsu Rosewood Signature

$5495

The Rosewood tracks well, and sings with emotional intensity while avoiding upper-midrange emphasis or treble brightness. The bass range was tightly defined and well-integrated with the lower midrange. You might say that the Rosewood Signature

epitomized reviewer Dick Olsher's ideal notion of the Goldilocks mc. Listening to this cartridge became an addictive experience. It was difficult to curtail a listening session as there was always one more album to spin. It's the moving coil DO could happily live with for years to come—and one of the easiest recommendations he's ever made. (295)

Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti

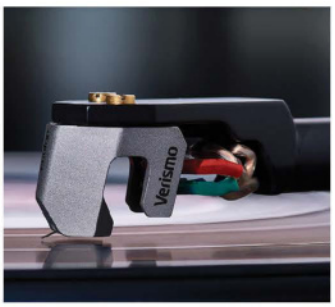
$5999

The Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti is the newest version of the original MC Windfeld cartridge. The Ti's body structure is SLM (selective laser melted) titanium and stainless steel; its motor is similar to that of the MC A95. Sonically, the Ti allows the listener to play nearly every album in his catalog without being bothered by any sins of commission. This ability to play whatever, whenever, is the MC Windfeld Ti's biggest asset. (285)

Ortofon MC Verismo

$6999

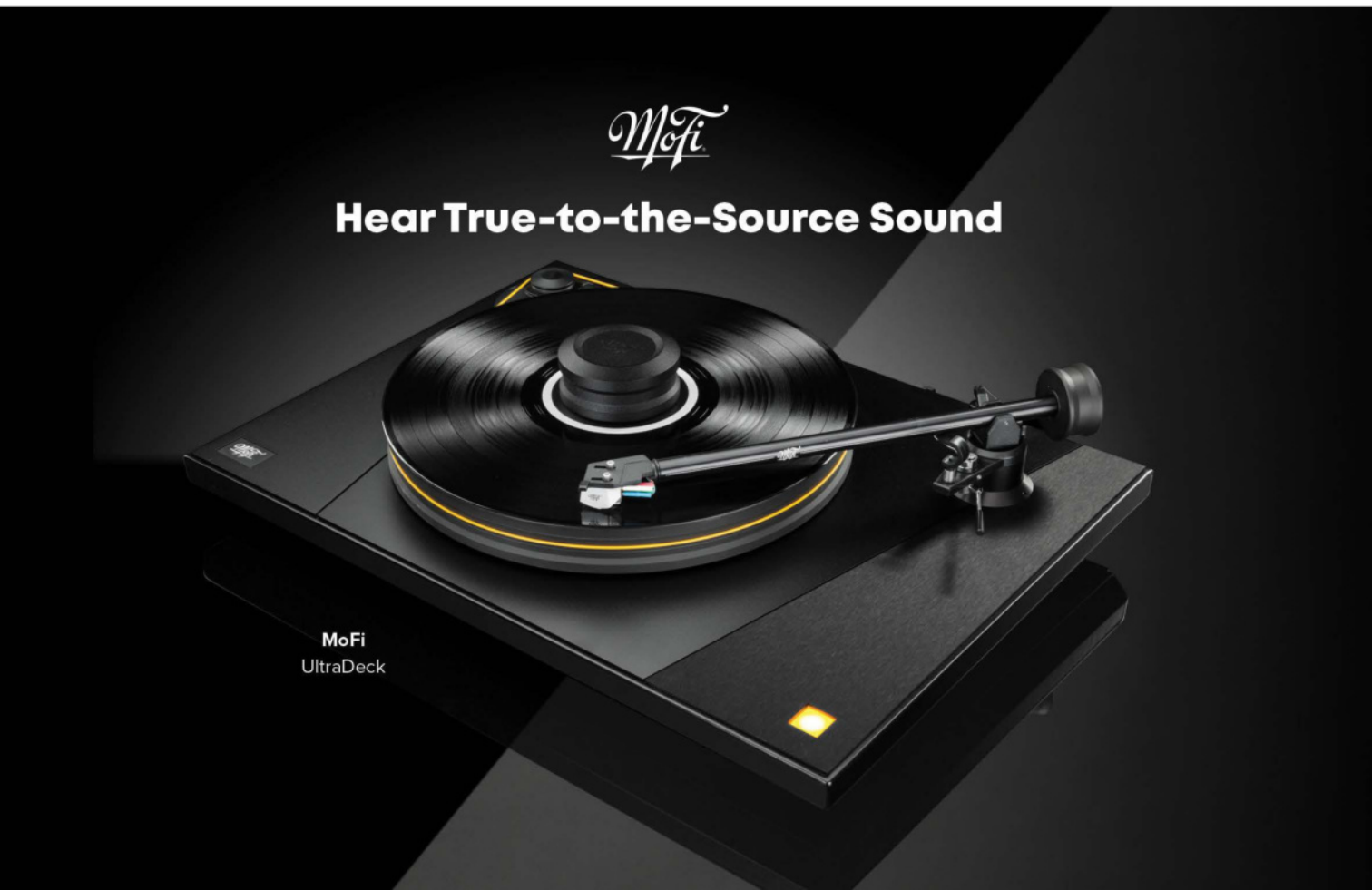
The Verismo's body is made of titanium and uses Ortofon's Selective Layer Melting process to form a dense and ridged structure with high internal damping. Combined with the Replicant 100 stylus, Aucurum coils, low-magnetic armature, and field stabilizing element, the Verismo has the added advantage of an upgraded Wide-Range-Damping system (a platinum disc between two dissimilar rubber absorbers containing Multi Wall Carbon Nano Tubes). As a result of these technologies, the Verismo boasts improved tracking abilities that puts its performance at a high level. The Verismo tracks grooves effortlessly, providing a greater amount of perceived realism than AJ can remember from this cartridge manufacturer. If you want fully balanced performance with an ever-so-slight hint of warmth that completely avoids any sense of excess top-end aggression, the 2022 Golden Ear Award-winning Verismo is worth consideration. (339)



Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum

$8495

Befitting a transducer from Koetsu, the latest Rosewood Signature Platinum mc boasts a midrange to die for. What differentiates it from the other two Rosewood models in the line (the less pricey Rosewood and Rosewood Signature) are



a stiffer body composed of lacquered, aged rosewood, plus the rare platinum magnets and silver-plated 6N copper coils normally reserved for Koetsu's stone-body cartridges. Along with that famous midband expect a wide-open, highly convincing recreation of the recorded soundstage, with plenty of air and depth, a seductively rich palette of instrumental colors and textures, and plenty of bottom-end wallop when asked for. A classic, Koetsu's Rosewood Signature Platinum seduces our ears, brains, and beings with its notable beauty, intellectual, and emotional pleasure. (317)

Lyra Etna Lambda

$8995/$9995 SL version

The original Etna had a seductive liquidity that won AT's heart and ears. As it turns out, the new Lambda version is better in not one or two but in a plethora of ways. These include background blackness, detail retrieval, image solidity and weight, timbral realism, and soundstage depth. There's also reduced sibilance and, possibly the most obvious change, more powerful and incisive bass. Yet, the new Etna manages to maintain—and even reinforce—the innate musicality and lushness of the original, and it does so without adding a trace of heaviness. This is no mere minor sonic upgrade. The Etna Lambda could and should be considered an entirely new cartridge. And it's more spectacular than ever. (338)

My Sonic Lab Signature Gold

$8995

Founded in 2004 by Yoshio Matsudaira, My Sonic Lab is one of those little cartridge companies that are unknown to all but a lucky few. Matsudaira-san's design goal was to increase a moving-coil's output signal without also increasing the number of coil turns. (More coil turns result in losses of detail and frequency response.) The discovery of a new core material (SH-ÊX) allowed him to replace the commonly used iron alloys and create his dream mc, with the lowest amount of signal loss combined with the highest relative output. The Signature Gold hits all the right notes: It tracks like crazy, delivers exceptional detail, energy, and dynamics, and generates a holographic soundstage with spot-on imaging, as well as a great purity of tone and "you-are-thereness." (317)

DS Audio Master3/Master3 Equalizer

$9500/$17,500 (equalizer)

The optical cartridge with internal LED and photo sensors is a relatively new thing (though the idea of using light to read record grooves goes all the way back to the 1950s). That the

folks at DS Audio are taking the perfection of this concept seriously is shown by the remarkable sonic progress they've made from the Nighthawk to the DS-002 to this, their new flagship transducer. The Master1 cartridge and Master1 equalizer are simply outstanding components, setting new benchmarks for vinyl playback in several areas (mechanical silence, neutral voicing, and midrange-to-midbass realism). Even where DS Audio's offerings aren't setting standards, they are now competitive with the finest coils and moving magnets. If JV were in the market for a new phono cartridge and he had the money, the Master1 system would be at the very top of his short list of must-hears. (306, Master3 not yet reviewed)

Ortofon MC Diamond

$9999

Ortofon's most evolved moving-coil generator system is housed in an optimally shaped, selective-laser-melt (SLM) titanium body. A detail-resolving nude Replicant 100 stylus/solid diamond cantilever assembly mated to a non-magnetic armature minimally wound with high purity copper wire still manages to produce 0.2mV thanks to a powerful, efficient neodymium magnet system. A re-engineered version of Ortofon's WRD (Wide Range Damping) system uses a newly developed in-house Multi-Wall Carbon Nano-Tube suspension material. The result is a high resolution, low coloration, wide dynamic range ride through the grooves. MC Diamond is an imaging and soundstaging champion of unrivaled build-quality and uniformity. (338)

Air Tight PC-1 Supreme

$11,600

As good as the Air Tight PC-1 is, this considerably pricier moving-coil from AT is substantially better in every way. The original PC-1 used a new high-mu core and winding material said to have three times the saturation flux-density and initial permeability of conventional core materials. In plain English, its magnets produced a much stronger magnetic field, greatly lowering noise and coloration and greatly increasing resolution. The Supreme literally takes this low-internal-impedance/higher-magnetic-energy technology to a new level. Killer good on transients top to bottom, with phenomenal grip and definition in the low bass, the Supreme is also exceptionally lifelike in the midband, with even more of the gorgeous density of tone color, high resolution, and superior soundstaging that made the original PC-1 one of JV's mc references. Along with the Air Tight Opus 1 and the Goldfinger Statement, the Supreme is, in JV's opinion, one of the best mc's on the market. (190)

Lyra Atlas/Atlas SL Lambda

$11,995/$12,995

If you're in the market for a top-end cartridge, Lyra offers not one but two versions of its signature Atlas. The first has 0.56mV output, the second 0.25mV. Which one to choose? The regular Atlas offers a bit more slam and sizzle than the super-low-output version. But the lower-output Atlas provides more finesse and a lower noise floor. Rock aficionados will probably gravitate to the regular Atlas, but for classical the higher-priced cartridge is the better match. Each features nonparallel walls to reduce nasty resonances, and their nude bodies make them fairly easy to install. Neither has the lushness of a Koetsu. But both are superlative cartridges that will provide a spellbinding presentation of well-nigh any LP. (276, 284)

HiFiction X-quisite ST

$13,160

There is nothing fictitious about the exquisite character of the X-quisite cartridge, which is constructed in Switzerland with horological precision. Right off the bat, the translucency and transient accuracy of this 0.3mV moving coil are abundantly apparent. There may, in fact, be no other cartridge that quite manages to duplicate its lock on the transient note, a quality that provides a kind of window into the performer's intention that is difficult to forget. The X-quisite revels in disinterring previously obscured detail but is in no way astringent. The finest shadings, the most delicate filigree, are presented with aplomb by the X-quisite. (317)

DS Audio Grand Master/Grand Master EQ

$15,000, cartridge/$45,000, two-box equalizer

The DS Audio Grand Master optical transducer comes closer to the sound of R2R tape than any other phono cartridge on the market (except the Grand Master EX). Yes, it is expensive, though you don't have to buy the dedicated Grand Master EQ units to get your sonic money's worth. (Any DS Audio EQ device will work with it—and there is a wide variety of them at a wide variety of price points, starting below $2k.) Unlike every other phono cartridge and phonostage on the market, the Grand Master and its EQ units are dead quiet—without a trace of the hum, buzz, RF, and self-noise that analog lovers have simply learned to live with. The elimination of the usual background racket, coupled to an optical system's inherently deeper and fuller presentation of the bass and lower midrange, rich, supremely detailed midband, and sweet, airy, ribbon-like treble, makes for the most "complete" and (given a great LP) most realistic reproduction of the music and musicians on LPs JV has yet heard. A Grand Masterpiece. (316)

Air Tight Opus 1

$15,800

Air Tight's top-line moving-coil cartridge adds even more resolution, dimensionality, and energy to the beautiful reproduction of tone color and superior soundstaging that the PC-1 Supreme is justly famous for. Though not quite the nonstop thrill-machine and sonic vacuum cleaner that the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement is, the Opus has a smoother, better-behaved upper midrange and treble and (building on one of the strengths of the Supreme) phenomenally deep-reaching, superbly defined, extraordinarily quick and powerful bass. Quite neutral in balance, it has much of the

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speed and resolution of über-cartridges, without any trace of the analytic. One of JV's references, and RH's reference. (261)

Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement V2.1

$17,500

The original Statement and the V2 were gorgeous-sounding devices that made even flawed records sound fairly "good." The V2.1 is more honest and less forgivingly *gemütlich* than its predecessors. On a great record, like Jack DeJohnette's landmark free-jazz album *Special Edition* (ECM), the V2.1's wonderful distinction of tone colors and performance details (e.g., the big, dark, hollow column of David Murray's bass clarinet, the higher-pitched, more nasal and piercing timbre of Arthur Blythe's alto sax, the sweet, baritone voice of Peter Warren's bowed cello, and the huge shimmering disc of DeJohnette's crash cymbal on "One for Eric" and "Zoot Suite") is astoundingly realistic. Widely and distinctly imaged on Clearaudio's famously vast, three-dimensional soundstage, the quartet, their instruments, their touch and tone are reproduced so faithfully and completely that you can almost see them playing there in front of you. (341)

DS Audio Grand Master Extreme

$22,500

This upgraded version of the original optical Grand Master cartridge, the brainchild of Tetsuakio Aoyagi, the president of DS Audio, is not merely an upgrade. It truly merits that overused term "game-changer" because it changes the analog game in profound ways. It is richer, faster, and more palpable than its predecessor, offering a lifelike presentation of fine recordings and lifting merely mundane ones to the level of pleasurable listening. The level of micro-detail that it excavates from the grooves is uncanny, rendering the most minute bowing on a cello fully audible. The construction of the cartridge's stylus and cantilever, which transmit the groove modulations to an optical generator, is similar to that of the nifty Swiss X-quisite cartridge but goes one level further. It sports a 0.22mm one-piece diamond cantilever that employs no adhesive, a process that is supposed to allow it to detect the vibration of the needle tip more accurately. Listening to it will surely turn almost any analog lover into an adherent of no adhesion, for the results are immediately audible. Bass reproduction is stygian and the treble effortless. Add in a far more stable soundstage in which the position of various instruments can easily and rapidly be identified, and you have one of the, if not *the*, best cartridges extant. (Forthcoming)

TAPE DECKS

J-Corder Technics 1500

Starting at $5995; $7995 with enhanced Record/Playback Option

J-Corder offers beautiful cosmetic choices with completely rebuilt Technics prosumer reel-to-reel machines that not only preserve the Technics' original functionality but also bring those highly reliable decks back to their original specifications—and beyond with J-Corder performance options. Its $2000 Record/Play option significantly upgrades the electronics with higher-quality parts and a custom-calibrated, matching headblock to coax out another 8dB of recording headroom while significantly improving the deck's sonics. Whereas the J-Corder 1520 has switchable IEC equalization, other J-Corder models need the optional second playback head output married with external electronics to play prerecorded CCIR-compatible tapes, like those from The Tape Project. However, these decks are really designed for users to make incredible recordings of their favorite tracks. A great way to preserve your irreplaceable source material while it's still in pristine condition. (Forthcoming)

SonoruS ATR10 MKII

$32,500

SonoruS' Arian Jansen retains the classic chassis and time-tested transport mechanism of the vintage Studer/Revox PR99 deck but completely updates the unit's tape-drive and tube (E88CC/6922) electronics. The result is a unit capable of playing back today's growing number of 15ips, two-track, CCIR-biased reel-to-reel tapes (from companies such as The Tape Project, Opus3, Yarlung, and Analogue Productions) with gorgeous mid-to-treble-range timbre and texture, simply spectacular wall-to-wall soundstage, and astonishingly three-dimensional imaging. What the ATR10 sounds like, to JV's ear, is an ARC Reference 40/Reference 250 combo with killer bass. (234, MKII version not yet reviewed)

United Home Audio Ultima5 OPS-DC

$34,500, ($41,000 with OPS-DC outboard DC power supply)

While current analog technology (particularly DS Audio's near-massless Grand Master Extreme optical cartridge and ES-001 centering device) has brought LP playback considerably closer to the sound of tape, there is still a gap, which Greg Beron's latest iteration of his Ultima Series of tape decks, the Ultima5 OPS-DC, consistently reveals and exploits. Of course, much depends on the quality of the tape transfer. But, at their best (or even a little bit short of their best), 15ips reel-to-reel tapes can be astonishingly realistic sounding, provided that the tape deck is first rate. The United Home Audio Ultima5 with OPS-DC power supply is precisely that—first rate. With parts and circuitry derived from Greg's $90k SuperDeck, the Ultima 5 is more neutral in balance with better reach and dynamic impact in the bottom octaves, a wider, deeper soundstage, tighter imaging, higher resolution, and fuller, more accurate, natural, and continuous reproduction of the dynamic/harmonic envelope than previous Ultimas. If you're in the market for a great, full-sized, playback-only, 15ips tape deck (and don't want to bet the farm on a no-holds-barred UHA SuperDeck), the Ultima5 OPS-DC would, unquestionably, be the unit JV recommends. (338)

ESPRIT

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Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX

€35,000

Before he heard Metaxas & Sins' Tourbillon T-RX—one of the first *brand-new* (i.e., non-refurbished) R2R tape decks in decades—JV would've bet big money that nothing else out there could compete with Greg Beron's UHA decks. Turns out, however, Mr. V. would've lost his wager. This relatively petite, portable tape player from the fertile mind of Kostas Metaxas is not only an object of great physical beauty and Swiss-watch-like mechanical workmanship; it is also a sonic wonder. The 15ips (it will also play at 7½ and 30ips), two-track Tourbillion with user-selectable (CCIR or NAB) equalization is Kostas' attempt to improve upon the build-quality, sonics, and ergonomics of Stellavox's celebrated SP8, which many professionals considered the best portable tape recorder ever made. Having had no experience with the SP8, JV cannot say whether Mr. M. has succeeded in outdoing his long-time reference. What he can say, with complete confidence, is that the T-RX is gorgeously made, performs flawlessly, and sounds fabulous. Another of JV's R2R references. (324)

United Home Audio SuperDeck

$89,998

This completely refurbished, three-box, 15ips, Tascam reel-to-reel tape deck, with bespoke enclosures, boards, parts, damping, and wiring, is the best effort yet from tape maven Greg Beron—and, along with the Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon, the best (which is to say, the most lifelike) source component JV has yet heard in his home. Though the speed, color, resolution, and, above all else, vanishingly low noise of the DS Audio Grand Master optical cartridge and EQ units have pushed vinyl playback considerably closer to the sound of tape, LPs still aren't as naturally full in tone, continuous in duration and intensity, or audibly complete in their presentation as the UHA SuperDeck. Of course, two-track open-reel tape has several built-in sonic advantages—not the least of which is the sheer amount of information laid down in its wider tracks (and the higher resolution with which those tracks are scanned)—all of which you can hear, *par excellence*, with Greg's great new machine. If you have the dough and a hankering for the sound of the real thing, it will be tough to find a better source component. JV's third R2R reference. (319)

ROOM CORRECTION/EQUALIZERS/SIGNAL PROCESSORS

Schiit Loki Mini+

$149 ($159 silver)

The Loki Mini+ is a four-band (20Hz, 400Hz, 1.2kHz, 20kHz), line-level EQ device intended for use as a tone control to adjust the broad-band balance of recordings. No matter how neutral your system may be in whatever sense you interpret that concept, no recording will have been monitored on a system that matches yours exactly, so it is inevitable that recordings will benefit from perhaps subtle but still meaningful adjustments, case by case. This used to be taken for granted, and tone controls were part of all preamps. But this is no longer the case in general. With minimal signal alteration outside the adjustable balance change, a price that is startlingly low, and convenient easy operation, you can take control of tonal-balance adjustments in a way that will revolutionize your listening experience. Unless you want to go directly to the Schiit Lokius, with six bands, or the ultimate Schiit Loki Max, you owe it to yourself to try the Loki Mini out. You will never go back to not having this kind of control, REG predicts. (324)

Schiit Loki Max

$1499

At a considerably higher price than the Loki Mini +, but still reasonable for what it offers, the Loki Max is Schiit's ultimate line-level EQ device. Its six bands (20Hz, 120Hz, 400Hz, 2kHz, 6kHz, 16kHz) give detailed control of recording balance and even have some utility for speaker/room adjustment, though the Max is not intended for detailed room correction *a la* DSP room-correction programs. The Max has a remote control so you can make adjustments on the fly from the listening position. And the remote has memory so one can keep corrections in storage. And you can switch the EQ in and out remotely, too, to hear the difference. The device is very carefully built and uses relay potentiometers for extremely precise channel matching and absolutely minimal signal degradation. It is top quality all the way and is effectively transparent, indeed. All the change you hear is the one you dialed in, the (minimum phase) alteration of frequency response. The ultimate answer for tone control, says REG, a modern-day replacement for the Cello Palette of yore. (Forthcoming)

Legacy Audio Wavelet II DSP Room Correction System

$7950

Legacy designed the highly sophisticated Wavelet DSP speaker- and room-correction processor (recently updated to the Wavelet II, review forthcoming) to bundle with its own speakers, but this version can be used with any speaker. Functionally, the Wavelet is a preamp with integral DAC, digital crossover, and multi-band digital equalizer. It will correct for speaker and room frequency-response variations, as well as change the time-domain behavior of the wavelaunch from the speaker to reduce the deleterious sonic effects of room reflections. (287)

Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio

$23,800

The BACCH-SP adio is a controller/DAC with both analog and digital outputs. What distinguishes it from dozens of other products, and its *raison d'être*, is the "Band Associated Crosstalk Cancellation Hierarchy" filter developed by Dr. Edgar Choueiri at Princeton University. Interaural crosstalk—the tendency, in most listening environments, for sound from the right loudspeaker to get to the left ear and vice versa—has negatively impacted the realistic representation of spatial

cues since the dawn of stereo. Previous attempts at crosstalk cancellation have been compromised by tonal coloration and the need for a listener to sit perfectly still for the process to work. Choueiri has solved both problems, and the results with the great majority of stereo recordings are quite remarkable. The sort of envelopment associated with multichannel playback, as well as superior representation of a venue's reverberation characteristics, is often heard. Most exceptional is an advance in dimensionality and image specificity throughout the soundfield. Seventy years' worth of two-channel recordings have the potential to take on previously unappreciated palpability and spatial detail. The DAC is a Sigma-Delta type with 24-bit/96kHz resolution. Included is a dedicated iPad loaded with Theoretica's user-friendly software, the tiny microphones that are briefly placed in the listener's ears to make an individualized BACCH filter, and a webcam to accomplish headtracking. (333)

RECORD CLEANERS

Spin-Clean Record Washer MKII
$79

The Spin-Clean System is a purely manual design—nothing to plug in. A little elbow grease and fresh air do all the work. Fill the taxicab-yellow basin with distilled water, add a capful of the cleaning solution, and spin the record between the brushes. Ambient air and a couple of swirls of the supplied lint-free cotton cloths do the rest. It's also a truly green product, totally off the grid. And the results speak for themselves—clean surfaces mean less noise and more fully resolved music. For lighter duty it's tough to beat. (201)

Record Doctor VI
$329

For those who love and care for their vinyl but don't want to break the bank on a cleaner, the Record Doctor VI (its latest iteration) offers a smart design compromise that keeps its—and your—costs down: Most of its functions are performed manually, as the system eschews the complex mechanics and motors that upper-tier record-cleaning machines employ. But the Record Doctor still uses a powerful motor-driven vacuum to handle the final step of fluid, dust, and dirt extraction. Setup and operation are a snap. The new VI is significantly upgraded, with a more rigid chassis along with cooler and quieter operation. (Version V reviewed in 274)

Pro-Ject VC-E2
$499

A clean record not only sounds better, with less surface noise; a clean record also makes your cartridge last longer since there are fewer abrasive elements left in the grooves after a proper cleaning. So, it simply stands to reason that every vinyl enthusiast should own a record-cleaning machine. Using the VC-E is simple, but good technique is essential to maximize the VC-E's potential. The machine comes with a small bottle of concentrated cleaning fluid, a larger bottle for the mixed-with-water cleaning solution, and a cleaning brush. The Pro-Ject VC-E supplies the basic tools necessary to clean records efficiently and easily. For any LP lover who wants to hear every bit of potential sonic goodness from his records, the VC-E is an excellent way to boost your LP collection up to a cleaner state of being. (306)

Degritter Ultrasonic
$3280

The Degritter brings the incontrovertible benefits of ultrasonic LP-cleaning to a new, lower price. Even better, the Degritter is easy and fun to use, offers a wide array of features, is relatively quiet in operation, and is software upgradable. The advantages of ultrasonic LP cleaning go beyond quieter surfaces; those microscopic bubbles remove contaminants that brushes can't touch to render greater soundstage depth and definition, higher resolution, and a greater feeling of life. If the $6500 Clearaudio Double Matrix Sonic is outside your budget, the Degritter is the ultrasonic cleaner to buy. (320)

Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic
$6500

Already pretty damn impressive in its Double Matrix version, the Double Matrix Sonic adds a "sonic" vibration option to Clearaudio's fully automated, brush/fluid/vacuum record-cleaning machine (which works on both sides of a record simultaneously). Whether it's due to those sonic vibrations or just more advanced brushes and fluids or both, LPs do sound notably cleaner via the Sonic (i.e., lower in noise, higher in resolution). JV isn't sure that this latest Clearaudio is equal to or better than a full-bore sonic record cleaner, but it is certainly less of a hassle ergonomically—and it never spills fluid or generates enough heat to warp records (even temporarily), as certain sonic record-cleaning machines do. (Forthcoming)

STANDS AND RACKS

Stillpoints Ultra Mini/Ultra SS V2/Ultra II/Ultra 5 V2/Ultra 6 V2/Ultra 7/LPI V2
$150/$299/$430/$839/$1079/$1299-1399/$659

Stillpoints' Ultra SS and Ultra 5 isolation devices are extremely effective in reducing vibration in components. They can also be positioned under speakers, replacing spikes or footers (Stillpoints offers a range of threaded adapters to fit any speaker). Whether deployed under preamps, power amps, DACs, or speakers, Stillpoints' isolation devices can produce a significant improvement in the sound, specifically resolution of low-level detail and the ability of the speaker to disappear into the soundstage. The Ultra SS and Ultra 5 differ in the number of "pockets" of isolation mechanisms within the footer. The effect of more Ultra devices is synergistic; the more you add, the greater the apparent gain. The LPI applies Stillpoints'

technology to a record clamp, emulating the salutary sonic effects of vacuum hold-down on any turntable. (Ultra SS, 219; LPI and Ultra 5, 225; Ultra 6, 265)

Townshend Audio Seismic Podiums

$1395–$2695 (varies according to size)

Townshend's unique take on speaker isolation proved irresistible to NG. Supported at each corner of the platform by Load Cells—a height-adjustable damped-spring system—the Podiums are essentially colorless, never insinuating themselves into the music. Any suggestion of sonic constraint or congestion simply goes *poof*. The soundstage is liberated from a subtle opacity and veiling, which results in a wider spectrum of tone colors, better micro-dynamic gradients, and increased dimensionality. Images emerge and recede naturally, and bass response, extension, and pitch flow more freely. The Podiums become so fundamental to the listening experience that calling them mere accessories fails to give them enough credit. (312)

Symposium Acoustics Isis

Price varies with configuration

The Symposium Acoustics Isis combines three different kinds of damping: mass, constrained-layer, and (for lack of a better word) tectonic. Using heavy-duty steel shelves that are themselves damped with constrained-layer material and heavy-duty, segmented, aircraft-grade aluminum legs that are isolated from the shelves, from each other, and from the floor via Tellurium/copper spike-feet and Symposium's patented rollerblock technology, the Isis eliminates all lateral and vertical motion induced by floorborne or airborne resonance. Its effectiveness is astonishing. (Not reviewed)

Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce

$3500 (natural or black finish)

CMS products have revised reviewer Alan Taffel's concept of what a good equipment rack should do. Previously, he saw the rack's role as making the products they support sound their best. Of course, this remains one goal, and it is one that the Sotto Voce, CMS' entry-level offering, meets with ease. Components on the SV benefit from tighter bass, transients with more verve and no less control, and sharper rhythms. However, the SV imparts another benefit in that it dramatically reduces the noise floor of the entire system. By getting what AT can only describe as "random energy" out of the sound, the SV delivers a less electronic, less hurried, less blurred presentation of the music. Not only that, BUT the SV is ALSO a lovely piece of furniture and costs one-tenth the tariff of CMS' flagship Maxxum system. And, when fortune smiles, there are a multitude of ways to upgrade the Sotto Voce. (249)

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum MK III Amplifier Stand

$7875

This beautifully built product is based on the same technology found in Critical Mass Systems' Maxxum equipment racks; the stands are essentially a Maxxum shelf mounted on a four-point X-shaped support structure. Sonically, this amplifier stand allows the system to better resolve low-level information. The increase in resolution isn't heard so much as greater detail (although it is to some degree), but rather as an increase in the sense of realism, spatial definition, the fine dynamic structures of instruments, and the ability of the loudspeakers to disappear. (249)

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum MK III

$7875 per component

These (critically) massive, beautifully engineered, extraordinarily well-made equipment stands—constructed of heavy-duty CNC-milled and mirror-polished aerospace aluminum struts and heavy-duty CNC-milled aerospace and mirror-polished aluminum shelves with constrained layer damped inserts in their tops and roller-bearings underneath (the whole she-bang finished in gorgeous custom high-end automotive paint)—are the *ne plus ultra* in audio-component support systems. Not only do they look gorgeous; they also work more effectively to eliminate floorborne resonance than any other stands JV has tried. Where really heavy footfalls nearby turntables sitting on previous support systems could make the stylus skip, nothing—not even jumping up and down in place—seems to faze gear sitting on the Maxxums. Very expensive but definitely worth it for those of you with this kind of mad money (and a taste for beautiful things), the Maxxum is JV's reference. (226)

Stillpoints ESS

$8450–$75,000 (depending on configuration)

Stillpoints has always possessed an uncanny ability to lower the noise floor with its innovative footers. But its amp stands, and ESS racks are simply brilliantly innovative designs that will take your system even further into the realm of stygian silence. Both are based around an unobtrusive open architecture that allows your audio gear to take pride of place rather than a bulky rack. The amp stands can be adjusted to fit pretty much any amplifier and dramatically improve dynamics and interstitial detail. The same goes for the ESS racks, which offer an elegant and effective solution for housing your precious audio gear. (255, 312)

Critical Mass Systems Olympus

$12,275 per component

The flagship of the Critical Mass Systems line, the Olympus lives up to its name in size, sheer visual presence, and most importantly, sound quality. This no-holds-barred equipment stand features CMS's most advanced implementation of its technology for reducing component vibration. The Olympus equipment rack and matching amplifier stands lower the noise floor, allowing fine timbral, dynamic, and spatial details to emerge as well as allowing the system to create a rock-solid bass foundation. The build- and finish-quality are nothing short of spectacular. The Olympus' performance is taken to another level when it is used in conjunction with CMS's CenterStage isolation devices. Matching amplifier stands are $11,275 each. Expensive but worth it if you want the best. RH's reference. (Forthcoming)

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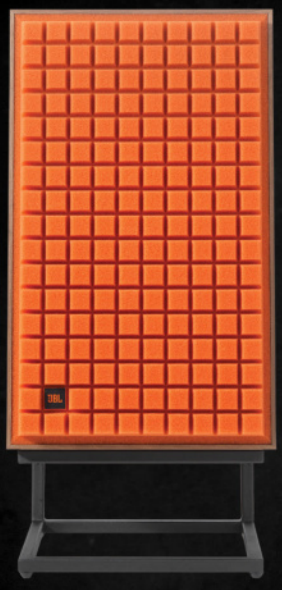

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HRS VXR

$33,520 with M3X2 Isolation Bases (+ Damping plates, Helix footers)

Harmonic Resolution Systems supplies one of the most effective resonance-control systems in high-end audio. At the heart of its line is the VXR stand. This heavyweight is a modular design that can be either grounded or isolated, and the isolation bases that are loaded into the stand are optimized for the weight range of the products that they support. The high-mass VXR stand, composed of a custom, billet-machined, heat-treated aluminum frame, appears to reduce, and not by a small margin, subliminal hash and grain, endowing the music with a sense of hush, or, if you prefer, black backgrounds, from which it emerges with greater fidelity. To complement its impressive stand, HRS also offer several other products, including a damping plate as well as Helix footers. (319)

POWER CONDITIONERS & GROUNDING PRODUCTS

Shunyata Research Venom Defender

$300

Power conditioning systems tend to give, and to take away. But the eminently affordable Venom Series power products from Shunyata blind-sided NG. Whether assembled individually or in one not-so-big-gulp, PS8/Defender clarified, fine-tuned timbre and character, and released heretofore hidden musicality from his system. Begin with the ruggedly built PS8 six-outlet conditioner, then consider adding even further refinement with the big-time surge protection and flagship filtration technology of the pint-sized Defender. If you have an AC outlet, you're good to go. Bravo to Shunyata for designing a system that acknowledges the fact that not everyone has the cash, space, or inclination to run dedicated lines into a listening room. Apartment dwellers take note. You'll never look at power strips and AC power quite the same way again. (239)

Audience aR2p/aR12/aR12-T4/aR6-T4

$695/$4995/$11,400/$6600 (Studio One powerChord upgrade, +$2400; Au24 SX upgrade, +$4660; frontRow powerChord upgrade, +$6300)

The aR2p, Audience's compact, dual-outlet power conditioner and isolation device is based on the massive 12-outlet versions of which Audience is rightly proud. Used with a CD player, its enhancement of soundstaging, dimensionality, and depth can be profound. With demanding high-current devices such as amplifiers, transients seemed a little soft. An audition is recommended. Further up the Audience food chain are the 12-outlet heavy-hitters. The aR12p was found to be an extremely effective conditioner, capable of delivering significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Its build-quality is nothing short of exemplary. At the top of the hill is the new TSS line with Teflon capacitors. (162, 179, 186, 235)

Audience forte V8

$980 (includes 1.75m forte f3 powerChord)

The Audience forte V8 power strip gets right down to business with eight hospital-grade AC outlets, each wired separately with high-purity stranded copper. The entire electric circuit has been treated cryogenically, as well. The V8 performed impeccably, with no discernible losses, changes, or degradations versus wall outlets. If anything, backgrounds were quieter and low-level detail more fully resolved. Bass response firmed up and conveyed greater control. Soundstage dimensionality and ambience retrieval were also enhanced. With impeccable build-quality, the V8 is virtually unbreakable—and not liable to break the bank. It ships with the exceptional forte F3 powerChord. In all, a no-brainer. (311)

CAD GC1

$1850

The CAD (Computer Audio Design) GC1 ground control device is a classic black box, intended to reduce high-frequency noise on the signal ground plane of the component(s) it is connected to. JHb doesn't completely understand how this passive device works; he only knows that it *does* work with most components, markedly reducing background hash, enriching timbre top to bottom, and adding a touch of three-dimensionality to voices and instruments. (342)

Nordost QKore Grounding System

QKore1 $2999, QKore3 $4099, QKore6 $5749

Unlike many products that purport to produce a purer sound, the QKore is a non-invasive grounding device that you plug into an unused input on a stereo component; it produces no extra-musical artifacts of its own. What it does is create a much blacker background from which the subtlest of details emerge with elegance and refinement. Every part of the sonic spectrum will also sound fuller and more transparent. For any high-end enthusiast seeking to improve his system, this is an essential component. (283)

Shunyata Research Altaira Grounding System

Price varies with configuration

Shunyata Research's Altaira Grounding System is a new product category that will be unfamiliar to most audiophiles—it was certainly new to me. The system is composed of one or more passive "hubs" to which you connect the ground terminals of your components via specially made cables that are part of the Altaira line. The hubs are small metal chassis, each with six equipment-grounding posts on the rear panel—there are no front-panel controls or indicators. A seventh ground post connects to a ground terminal on your power conditioner or to the ground pin of an AC outlet via an adapter plug. The idea behind Altaira is that the chassis grounds of all components are noisy; draining this noise from the components can improve sound quality. The Altaira not only lowered background noise and increased low-level resolution, it increased soundstage size, rendered more liquid timbres, improving timing precision in the bass, and enhanced the clarity of instrumental lines. (334)

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Shunyata Research Hydra Delta D6

$3250

Housed in a full-sized chassis and rated at 20 amps of continuous current, Shunyata's Delta D6 delivers the juice to more demanding systems, including high-powered amplifiers. Its most noteworthy sonic achievement is an expansion of spatiality and ease. At the micro-level, images are pocketed within halos of ambience within the soundspace. These micro cues create a finely focused presentation against an almost eerily noiseless and distortion-free backdrop. Equipped with top-notch features, superior electromagnetic breakers, 8-gauge ArNi conductors, Hubbell outlets, vibration-dampening materials, and cryogenic treatment, the Hydra Delta is a significant upgrade at a relatively modest price point. Shunyata's latest PC is among its most persuasive yet; it makes any audio rig less about electronics and more about music. (305)

AudioQuest Niagara 3000

$3900

At less than half the price of AudioQuest's top power conditioner (called a "Low-Z Power/Noise-Dissipation System"), this unit still costs more than three times the price of the littlest Niagara conditioner, the 1200. Which unit is right for you depends on the cost of your whole system, and how many outlets you need. (Seven outlets vs. 12 each for the 5000 and 7000.) While the 1200 itself brings wonderful noise reduction and improvements in sound, the 3000 definitely expands upon that in every dimension. Particularly when used in a holistic scheme with Audioquest's power cables like the NRG-Z3, Blizzard, and Thunder, the summing of all the subtle little improvements in so many areas adds up to an astounding increase in realism and naturalness. It's hard to go back once you have heard what the Niagara can do. (342)

Synergistic Research PowerCell 12 UEF SE/PowerCell SX

$6995 (includes Atmosphere SX level 3 PowerCell AC Cable, $3495)/$8995(includes Atmosphere SX level 3 PowerCell AC cable, $3495)

As a skeptic about power conditioners, JHb was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in imaging and dynamics rendered by the Synergistic Power Cell. Unlike many of its brethren (no need to mention them by name, the offenders know who they are), the PowerCell did not appear to limit current. Instead, it offers even blacker backgrounds and lowered grit and distortion. Particularly noteworthy were the smoother treble and improved suppleness of musical lines. The PowerCell is pleasingly lightweight and attractive. Synergistic head honcho and lead designer Ted Denney III, it must be said, continues to advance the state of the art when it comes to filtering electricity. As with all conditioners, however, auditioning the Synergistic in your own system is a must, as the quality of electricity varies markedly from home to home. (192)

Shunyata Research Everest 8000

$8000

Shunyata's new Everest 8000 is easily the company's finest effort yet, delivering an entirely unprecedented level of performance. This eight-outlet conditioner in a vertical truncated pyramid chassis benefits not just from Shunyata's previous work on AC power for audio, but from technology developed by founder Caelin Gabriel for Shunyata's sister company, Clear Image Scientific, which makes AC conditioning for medical imaging equipment. (311)

Furutech Pure Power 6 NCF (w Project V-1 power cord)

$8850/$9950

Furutech's dense, mysterious-looking, CNC-machined cube of aerospace-grade aluminum alloy is described as "virtual black hole for EMI and RFI." The six-outlet distributor uses rhodium-plated GTX-D NCF duplex receptacles and Furutech's proprietary NCF technology throughout. Through it, music took on renewed vitality, and visceral immediacy—the recordings sounding more than ever like hearing a live feed straight from the mixing board. It exhibited greater low-level micro-dynamic activity and tonal contrast and detail focus than stock outlets or even than the GTX outlets by themselves. It lifted NG's system to a new level of resolution, removing a thin layer of noise that had wrapped around images like sonic gauze. The result was a soaring immediacy with more snap, image focus, and soundstage dimensionality. Optionally coupled with Furutech's state-of-the-art flagship power cord, Project-V1, the NCF may be costly, but it redefined NG's system, making it the quietest it has ever been. (337)

AudioQuest Niagara 7000

$11,000

The 81-pound Niagara 7000 is the brainchild of AC design engineer Garth Powell, whom AudioQuest hired and essentially gave two years and carte blanche to design a new power device from scratch. Powell says the Niagara 7000 is not a power conditioner; rather, it relies on dielectric-biased AC isolation transformers to reduce distortion without reducing current to any component, including amplifiers. Essentially, the Niagara seeks to create a power bank for your amps so that it doesn't have to strain to grab voltage from the wall. The most immediate and salubrious effect of the Niagara was to offer more controlled and refined performance. The treble is definitely smoother and rounder with the Niagara. Overall, the Niagara is a fabulous piece of equipment that adds a sheen and palpability to the music that are utterly addictive. (271)

Synergistic Research PowerCell Galileo SX

$27,995 (Includes SRX AC cable, $10,000 6ft)

This top-of-the-line power conditioner from Ted Denney, with 12 Neutrik outlets and SRX's most advanced "EM cell" and power-supply technology, is remarkable, capable of supplying clean current to even the most demanding electronics (including monster power amplifiers). Everything plugged into it sounds markedly more "uninhibited," free of the sonic constraints that variable house

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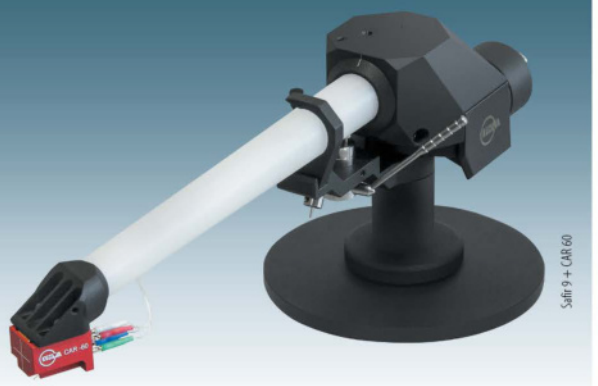
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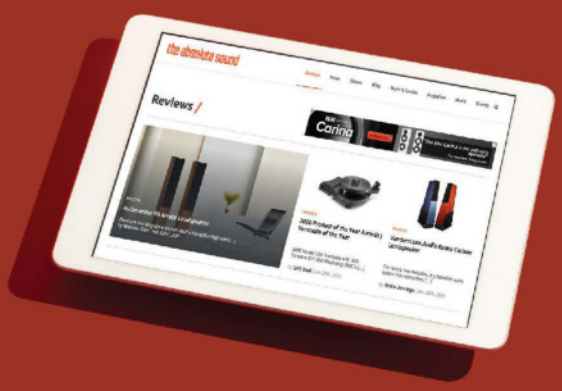

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current inevitably layers onto playback. Precise without sounding dynamically limited, clean without sounding colorless or antiseptic, finely detailed without loss of body and dimensionality, and tunable, as all SR products are, to your sonic taste, the Galileo SX is a downright wonderment. Alas, it is also expensive. Those who can afford it won't regret the purchase. (JV)

INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES

Transparent Audio The Link Interconnect, The Wave Speaker Cable, High-Performance Power Cord

The Link $100/1m; The Wave $250/8' pr.; High Performance Powerlink $340/2m.

Although we have experience only with Transparent's lower-priced offerings (at the moment), what we've heard has been extremely impressive. The $100 The Link interconnect brings more than a taste of high-end interconnects to an entry-level price. Similarly, The Wave speaker cable is a bargain, offering superior tonality, wider dynamics, and a more open soundstage. The High-Performance Power Cord is a vast improvement over stock AC cords, and just might be the most cost-effective upgrade possible in an entry-level system. The PowerWave 8 conditioner is also an extremely cost-effective upgrade, rendering wider dynamics, smoother timbres, and a greater sense of musical involvement. (Not reviewed)

Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/8TC and 12TC Speaker Cable

Interconnect $296/1m pr.; 8TC speaker $650/2.5m pr. with SBAN connectors; 12TC speaker $945/2.5m pr. with SBAN connectors

Yielding only a tiny bit in control, top-end transparency, and detailing to PS's reference, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition. Dead neutral, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. The 8TC speaker cable has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage. (138, 146)

WyWires Blue Series

Interconnect $299/4' pr. (RCA or XLR); speaker $599/6' pr. ($75 per addt'l foot)

The first WyWires cable reviewed in TAS, Blue is also one of the most pliable, easy-to-handle cables available; yet its sound is anything but humble. Its sonic signature is energetic, with a potent midrange, plenty of drive, and a slightly cooler, forward tilt. The Blue's sonics aren't juiced-up or overheated, but if the goal is high transparency and black-satin background silences it will prove a real achiever. It exhibits good rhythmic pace and a wonderful facility with inner detail. An unpretentious component that lets the quality of the recorded performance speak for itself, the WyWires puts the music upfront and centerstage. A truly auspicious debut. (236)

Cardas Audio Iridium

Interconnect $320/2m pr.; speaker $510/3m pr.

The Iridium interconnects and speaker cables are made from Grade 1 OFHC 99.9999% copper Litz wire with a cross-field geometry in an insulated FEP jacket. The geometry of the wiring is said to be a Shielded Star-Quad 4 arrangement in Golden Ratio proportions bound together by PTFE tape, while the hybrid shield is spiraled tin-plated copper surrounded by carbon-impregnated PTFE tape. The geometry of the speaker cable is a twisted pair using natural cotton filler wrapped together with a PTFE tape. The Iridium interconnect/speaker combination leaned toward being even in sonic distribution with a slightly warmer-than-neutral presentation with no enhancements and a slight reduction in low-level resolution and bass dynamics. If the system could use a bit fuller sound with additional bass authority in the power region and some reduction of upper-midrange and lower-treble energy, the Cardas Audio Iridium might fit that requirement. (274)

Nordost Purple Flare

Interconnect $389/1m pr., $529/2m pr.; speaker $582/1m, $780/3m

Featuring Nordost's classic flatline configuration the Purple Flare is a rung below the current incarnation of Blue Heaven, yet it's a little trip to heaven on its own. It really shines in the midband with a driving, slightly forward energy that imparts dynamic liveliness to all genres of music. There's significant macro-dynamic punch resulting in orchestral crescendos, full-blown percussion licks, and brass-section blasts of impressive authority. It evinces the transient speed of a sprinter, yet never suggests any serious tonal balance discontinuities. Its treble range is wonderfully free from major constrictions. Bass is not quite as fully exploited in extension or bloom, and there's a bit of coolness in the middle treble. But, on balance, it is as open and as transparent as any cable in this class. (236)

Shunyata Research Venom

Interconnect $450/1m pr. RCA ($570/2m), $650/1m pr. XLR ($810/2m); speaker $998/2m

The Venom Series represents 15 years of Shunyata Research's ongoing technical innovation and custom-parts engineering. To that end, the company uses the finest available metals, such as expensive Ohno Continuous Cast Copper. Also, Shunyata has included new features like hollow-core (VTX) conductors. Our reviewer found the Venom speaker cables and interconnects to be very natural, open, and dimensional. In much the same way that Shunyata's designs strive to keep distortion out of the signal path, its cables get out of the way of the music. The Venom speaker cables and interconnects offer a reasonably neutral palette with pleasing delicacy of detail and rich warm harmonics. To borrow a favorite expression from JV, they are quite gemütlich and sweet, without glare or etching. Some might find them a touch polite dynamically (I don't), but that's a matter of personal taste. Quite a high-quality signal cable that performs well and doesn't cost a fortune. (266)

Wireworld Eclipse 8

$525/1m pr., either RCA or XLR

The Eclipse 8 is a "go-to" product in mid-priced interconnects. Built from OCC copper, outstanding terminations designed by Wireworld, and the company's patented DNA Helix geometry, the Eclipse 8 is more technically sophisticated than is typical at this price. The Eclipse 8 adds no hardness or glare to the mids, has a smooth yet extended treble, and is overall remarkably transparent. (Forthcoming)

Esprit Audio Beta

Interconnect $599/1.2m pr. (RCA), $599/1.2m pr. (XLR); speaker $599/2m, $859/3m (with spades)

In foodie terms Beta is excellent bistro fare. Construction quality is first rate; terminations are robust. Beta is also an easy, compliant cable to handle, for those hobbyists who tend to swap out wires more frequently. Sonically, Esprit Beta has a throaty, chesty, midrange-centric presentation. Vocal detail is clean and expressive on baritones and sopranos alike. The treble is somewhat rolled on top, with a smooth sibilance region, making Beta easily listenable. Soundstaging is highly convincing in width and dimensionality, too. Tailored to a price point, Esprit Beta performs superbly for a budget model. (289)

Siltech Explorer 90

Interconnect 90i $605/1m pr.; speaker 90L $1075/6.5' pr.

Bringing Siltech quality and cachet to an easily affordable price point makes Explorer an excellent upgrade cable for a mid-priced system. Its healthy midrange, good articulation, and low-level reproduction make this a wire that will give many pause before spending much more. Dynamics and bass extension are convincing as they communicate many of the more specific timbral complexities in the lower octaves. It could be a trifle sweeter in the lower treble, but few wires challenge it at this tier. Along with some other frugal note-worthies Siltech's latest is redefining cable performance at this price point. (226)

Kimber Kable Carbon 16 & 18XL

Interconnect $620/1m; Carbon 16 $2520/2m; Carbon 18xl $4000/2m

From Kimber's innovative new Carbon Series, the Carbon 16 and 18XL conveyed a clean, lively, bold midrange with an octave-to-octave tonal balance that was honest and forthright. Neither laid back nor openly aggressive, Carbon 16 had a very slight neutral-to-forward midband push—a signature that flattered vocals. A key strength was Carbon's unshakable image stability. As good as Carbon 16 was, however, Carbon 18XL, the pinnacle of the Carbon Series, did everything just a little bit better and a little more convincingly. Its top end was more open and airy. The sound became more immersive, the portrayal of images more substantive and palpable. In sum, Carbon rings true and serves only one master—the music itself. (322)

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2

$625/3' pr., RCA or XLR

Moon Audio's specialty is custom, handcrafted cabling for any application. The V2 version of Silver Dragon, its top audiophile interconnect, uses an eight-wire braided geometry of solid-core 99.999% pure silver with Teflon insulation. Connectors are top-notch—WBT Nextgen or Furutechs. These wires are superbly quiet, establishing a dark silent backdrop from which music freely and cleanly emerges. Tonally, Silver Dragon is a model of smooth, rich midrange response—faithful to the real thing in its neutrality, color saturation, and fluidity. There's a satisfying mellowness to its character—one that doesn't exactly soften transients (there's plenty of snap and speed to go around) but does add a measure of overall warmth to the presentation. Silver Dragon is very specific in imaging and perspective—each musician is firmly in place and slightly forward on the stage. This is an interconnect that defies every expectation for a modestly priced product. (244)

Synergistic Research Foundation SX Series

Interconnect $699/1m pr. (RCA or XLR); speaker $749/8' pr.

(spade or banana)

JV wasn't expecting much—and certainly not *this* much—from Synergistic Research's immensely pliable, bargain-basement Foundation SX Series interconnects and cables, which are far slimmer, lighter, and less sophisticated in design than their rich relatives, the superb Galileo SRXes. But, trust him, sonically the Foundations come way closer to the Galileos than you would expect. Indeed, these two SR lines have a great deal in common—rich vibrant tone color, robust dynamics, spacious staging, lifelike imaging, high resolution. Oh, the more sophisticated Galileos are less bottom-up in balance, fuller, more finely detailed, and harder-hitting than the Foundations; then again, they ought to be—they cost 10-to-20 times the dough. (304)

Wireworld Mini Eclipse 8

$700/ 2.5m/pr. single termination, $800/ 2.5m/pr. bi-wire

These affordable speaker cables benefit from Wireworld's upper-end line, and feature the company's DNA Helix geometry, 14-gauge, OCC-copper conductors, and interchangeable spade or banana terminations. Nicely made and very flexible, the Mini Eclipse 8 has a neutral sonic character that imposes very little of itself on the music. The midrange and treble are extremely clean in texture, and the treble is open and detailed without being bright. A decided improvement over the already stellar Mini Eclipse 7. (Forthcoming)

Wireworld Silver Eclipse 8

Interconnect $800/1m (RCA or XLR); speaker single-wire, $3680/2m ($4450/2.5m)

Within the Wireworld lineup, Silver Eclipse stakes out territory between Eclipse and Platinum. It includes a larger number of strand groups, larger-gauge silver-over-copper conductors, plus a new iteration of Composilex insulation. Sonically, what defines the latest generation of Silver Eclipse, and arguably all Wireworld efforts, is a lack of spectacle—a less-is-more naturalism that brings forth a musical performance in all

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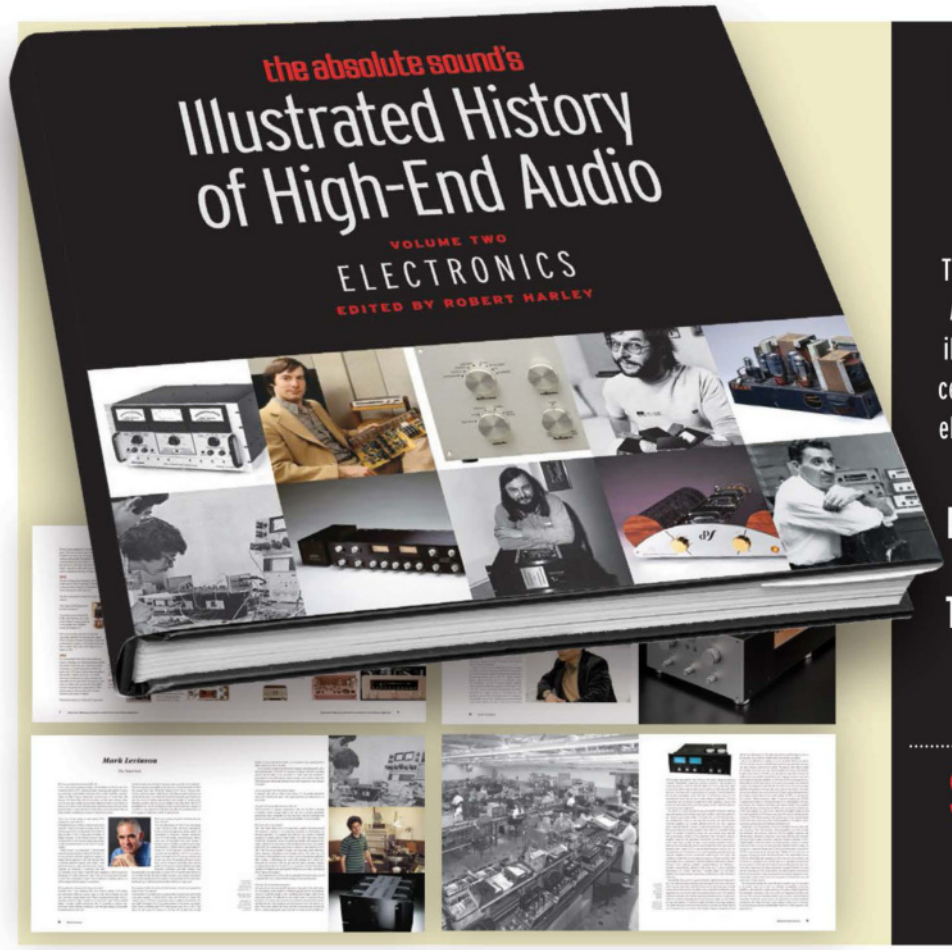

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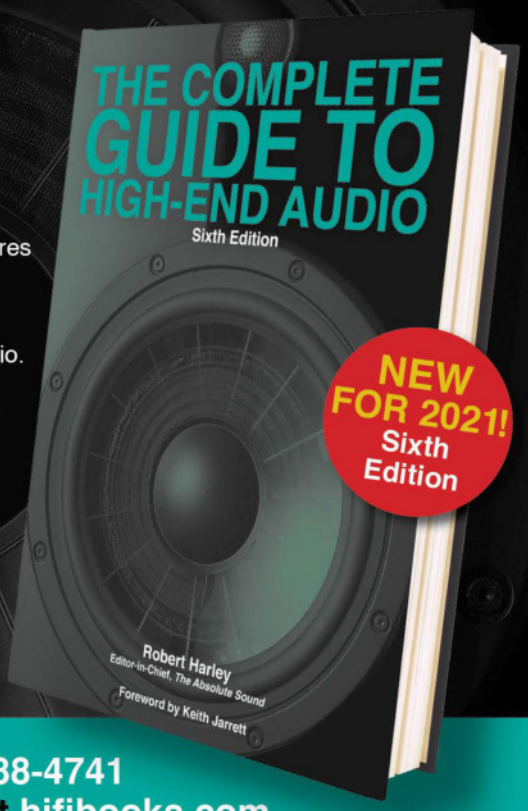

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its authenticity. Overall transparency in general and inner resolution in particular have improved. Transients are whip-quick and clean. Silver Eclipse opens up the space between images and sniffs out timbral distinctions and low-level complexities like a bloodhound. The surprise is just how closely this mid-priced model comes to Wireworld's flagship models. (301)

Harmonic Technology Paramount III and Armour Link III

Interconnect $1350/1m pr. RCA ($400 per 0.5m additional pr.); speaker $2500/8' pr. single-wire.

Paramount III and Armour Link III are Harmonic Technology's topline speaker cables and interconnects. As a system they produced highly detailed, musically insightful sonics across the board, with a wide spectrum of tonal color, excellent micro-dynamic shading, and powerful large-scale dynamic contrasts. Overall, their tonal character was essentially neutral with just the barest hint of a lighter complexion—a characteristic that often shows up in products with quick transient response. What most captured NG's attention was the HT's ability to elicit dynamic gradients from recordings. A statement product pure and simple, HT Paramount/Armour joins the ranks of some of the most elite cables in NG's experience. (255)

Synergistic Research Atmosphere SX

Alive (Level 1) Interconnect $1495/1m pr. RCA, $1795/1m pr. XLR; speaker $1995/8' pr.; AC $1495/5'
Excite (Level 2) Interconnect $2795/1m pr. RCA, $3195/1m pr. XLR; speaker $3995/8' pr.; AC $2495/5'
Euphoria (Level 3) Interconnect $4495/1m pr. RCA, $5495/1m pr. XLR; speaker $7495/8' pr.; AC $3495/5'

Synergistic's latest wire series represents the culmination of the brand's efforts to bring the wealth of innovative conductor, isolation, and resonance technologies from its active cables (including the flagship, Galileo LE) and merge them into a top-notch "passive" design. To revisit a phrase, "Mission accomplished." Aptly named, Atmosphere continues the Synergistic tradition of expanding the boundaries of the soundstage, of enlivening microdynamics, and of resolving fine detail. Available in four levels—the last three with Ground Plane Technology (Level Three and Four also include special terminations for Atmosphere Tuning Modules). As a bonus, the Atmospheres are vastly more flexible than the pricier Element Series for much easier positioning. In addition, price points have also benefitted accordingly. (262)

Cardas Clear Reflection

Interconnect $1500/1m pr. (RCA and XLR); speaker $3000/2.5m pr.

A blend of the company's previous Golden Reference design and its current Clear technology, Cardas Clear Reflection held its own when stacked up against more expensive cables and, accordingly, gets high marks for delivering good performance at a reasonable price. Reviewer KM was charmed by Clear Reflection's fluid, organized, detailed, and musically satisfying qualities, concluding that he would not hesitate to recommend it to others, or to consider it himself for a second system. (254)

Siltech Classic Legend 380

Interconnect 380i $1515/1m, $1965/1.5m; speaker 380L $3435/2.5m; power cord 380P $1210/1.5m

Tapping technologies from Siltech's flagship Crown Series, Classic Legend 380 is sonically and musically striking for its refined and naturalistic balance. It reproduces crisply defined images, ambient flourishes, and rock-solid soundstage boundaries. It's a detail-focused cable, not pushy in terms of forwardness or aggressiveness but not wishy-washy or laid back, either. Low-frequency information is superb, offering a sonic trifecta of pitch stability, grip, and extension. Key is its resolution of dynamic contrast, transient attack, and textural complexity. Low-level resolution is uniformly excellent. With Siltech's customary luxe finish, its tactile feel remains the embodiment of quality. (323)

Snake River Audio Signature

Interconnect $1695/1m RCA, $1795 XLR; speaker $2095/3m; power cord $1545/2m

Fluid, clean, and texturally colorful, Signature Series portrayed music with a warmly relaxed approach and settled into NG's system like a soothing balm. It evinced excellent balance across a wide range of criteria, namely micro-dynamics, harmonic sustain, and top-to-bottom extension. Treble response was particularly smooth and easy on the ears—even trumpet blasts, though appropriately brassy and aggressive, still retained the instrument's signature glow and bloom. Bass response was equally excellent; tuneful pitch and dynamics were reproduced with brio. A cable that embodies authentic high-end audio values, dollar value, and performance that just never gets old. (328)

Clarus Crimson

Interconnect $1740/1m pr., RCA; $2370/1m pr., balanced; $5040/6', speaker; $6000/6', bi-wire

These are no fire hoses, snaking around your equipment, but unobtrusive and fairly flexible wires whose terminations are beyond reproach. While these cables will not provide any extraneous fireworks or a vast soundstage, it is their very subtlety that eventually draws your attention. The cables are as elegant sounding as they are svelte. They supply by high-end standards an economical route to superb sonics that is unobtrusive both in execution and fidelity. Seldom has JHb heard as grain-free a cable as the Clarus, which lives up to the Latin provenance of its name—clear and shining. (320)

Nordost Frey 2

Interconnect $1924/1m; speaker $3189/1m; power cord $2199/1m

The radically updated Frey 2 combines the high performance macro- and micro-dynamics that Nordost is famous for with richer mids and a brawnier, meatier bottom end that gives orchestral music more discernable ambience and weight. Of course, transient speed is on

hand, but the Frey 2s are also a bit more controlled in the midbass and able to land a tighter dynamic punch than most of the competition. In a word, the Frey 2s deliver flat out more fidelity to the live event. Frey 2 power cords deserve some special props too—they offer supernaturally quiet black backgrounds that enhance the resolving power of the Frey 2 cable. (265)

Audience Au24 SX

Interconnect $1999/1m RCA pr. and $2640/1m balanced pr; speaker $3616/2.5m pr.

Audience's topline wire produces a ripe midrange weight and sweetness, vivid dynamic contrasts, and a profound sensitivity to delicate volume gradations. Ultimately, it possesses a brilliance that casts light in the deepest corners of the soundstage and restores air and lift to harmonics. A particular strength of all these cables is the often hard-to-achieve blend of the transient, the tactile, and the reverberant. The Au24 SX struck a fluid and natural balance of ease, articulation, and immersiveness. Superb. Flexible and easy to handle, too. (269)

Crystal Cable Reference² Diamond

Interconnect $2000/1m (+$500 per ½ meter) RCA/XLR; speaker $4890/2.5m; power $1250/1m

Reference² Diamond has a finely wrought, jewel-like quality and style—more like something found at a Tiffany & Co. counter than an audio store. But don't be fooled by its lithe physique, as Ref² Diamond steadfastly refuses to be typecast. It conveys a slightly dark, rich, romantic sound, a bit forward but with an element of roundedness in the midrange that lends music weight and substance. The area that left NG almost (but not quite) speechless was its ability to elicit finer and finer gradations of timbral and textural color and contrast. Refernce² Diamond hangs onto every breath, sibilance, syllable, and sustain. It embodies a level of uncolored musicality that brings out the full potential of your system. (342)

Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval

$2399/8' pr.

Brimming with resolution, tonal honesty, and dynamic life, constructed of pure silver over a stabilizing strand of OFC woven into AP's patented hollow-oval geometry in an oval-coaxial configuration, this is not a cable you listen to, but rather listen through. Music simply flows; tonality is earthy; harmonics align; images and soundstage conform. No snake oil here—the high end needs more of this level of honest performance at a reasonable price. (215)

Cardas Cables Clear

Interconnect $2500/1m pr.; speaker $5250/2.5m pr.

What makes Clear exceptional are its balance and coherence. Even compared with earlier Cardas efforts Clear conveys a wider band of resolving power and transparency, with greater speed and agility across the transient landscape. Its relaxed character and bass warmth are consonant with symphonic music. Plus, the naturalistic midrange lends an agreeable ripeness to orchestral string sections. There remains an almost buttery sweetness in the Clear but also a fluidity that projects the full unbroken acoustic of the symphonic experience. The only caveat: Like many of its premium ilk, Clear is a cable that only fully roars to life on premium gear where the full extent of its talents can be exercised. (226)

VooDoo Stradivarius Amati

$2500/1m RCA/pr; $2650/1m XLR

VooDoo's Stradivarius Amati offers up a ripe, full-bodied, colorfully detailed bounty of musicality. Tonally, it plays it straight down the middle with no obvious frequency hiccups. It had a forward-leaning character that lends solo instrumentalists and vocalists energy and presence. On a scale of warm-to-cool, Amati tilts ever so slightly to the cooler range—a subtle trait perceivable during high-drive wind or brass passages or upper-octave violin solos. Of note is its midrange and lower-midrange eloquence that brings to life the deep voicings and trailing resonances of cello and bass viol and bassoon or the throaty bloom of a tenor sax. The Amati knocks on the door of some of the best cabling out there. (311)

Nordost Tyr

Interconnect $2749/0.6m; speaker $6379/1m

A loom of Nordost's flat, FEP (fluorinated ethylene propylene) Tyr 2 interconnect and cable brings transparency, precision, purity, depth, texture, openness, and expansiveness to the listening experience. (305)

AudioQuest ThunderBird Zero

Interconnect 1m RCA or XLR $2900/$3900; speaker $5700/8ft.

AQ's most recent addition to its Mythical Creature Series, ThunderBird imparts rock-steady neutrality across the octaves, potent bass dynamics and pitch extension, a rich midrange, and a spirited harmonic liveliness in the upper ranges. There was nothing flimsy or passive or laidback about this Bird's tonal balance, either. And ThunderBird's top end was one of the most expressive and continuous NG has yet experienced. It seemed to minimize congestion across the orchestral soundstage, widen contrasts, and elucidate heretofore buried details. (338)

Audience frontRow

Interconnect 1m RCA$3300, 1m balanced $3800; speaker 2.5m$5500; frontRow powerChord $6440/5' standard and $5960/5' MP "medium power"

This new statement wire from Audience proved itself worthy of its name. Led by a full-throated chesty midrange, crisp highly focused imaging, and "you are there" transparency frontRow summoned up the electric excitement of live concert-going like few other cables NG has experienced. Always a strength with Audience cabling, dimensionality was even more extended and defined. With most wire there is often an awareness of limitations—whether they are frequency or dynamic restrictions, or transient speed bumps. But Audience's top-notch wire seems boundless in its responsiveness and musicality. Highly recommended for systems of superior resolution. (328)

Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 8

Interconnect $3600/1m pr., RCA or XLR; speaker $24,800/ 2.5m/pr. single termination, $25,000/2.5m/pr. bi-wire termination

PE7 represents the summit of Wireworld's current thinking. Using heavy nine-gauge OCC silver conductors (interconnects are 17-gauge OCC silver), and its own Composilex 2 insulation and DNA Helix conductor geometry, PE8 has little to do with hype or spectacle. Its tonal palette is the height of consistency—there are no random color shifts across the musical spectrum. It's neutrally balanced with just a pleasing gust of midrange warmth. And it becomes ever more expressive in the treble octaves—where most wires either narrow, bleach, or otherwise wring out the harmonic juices in the signal. Beyond its upper-octave performance, dimensionality and soundstaging are Platinum's most persuasive tools. It sets a symphonic stage with the same precision as the staff preparing the dining room table at Downton Abby. (244)

Shunyata Sigma V2

Interconnect $4000/1m RCA, $5000/1m XLR; speaker $9950/2m

The original Sigma signal cables KM reviewed in 2018 performed so far above their price level that he gave them a GEA that year. The new V2 generation performs considerably better across the board. Retained are patented technologies such as TRON, which cancels a charge buildup in the dielectric materials, and the V2 now has two, instead of one, Transverse Axial Polarizer modules, which block glare-causing longitudinal-oriented electromagnetic waves from disrupting the signal. The V2 speaker cable gets two return signal-reflection-reduction HARP modules instead of one, and the new VTX-Ag conductors now have concentric OFE copper surrounding a core of pure silver for greater dynamics, timing precision, and 3-D spatial accuracy. Technology aside, these cables really deliver the sonic goods. They made KM's less-than-stellar rig sound much closer to a super system than KM thought possible, so well did they tame underlying smear, grain, and glare that KM hadn't previously realized was even there. (331)

Kimber Kable Select

Interconnect KS 1036, $4100/1m pr. RCA; KS 1136, $4100/1m pr. XLR; speaker, KS 6068 $30,400/2.5m pr.

Everything about this blue-chip wire screams extreme. Vari-strand silver and solid-core silver conductors are used exclusively in its sophisticated construction. And yes, its price is breathtaking. Sonically, there's a lightning speed and feathery light-footedness to its sound. It has both a directness and a dimensional component that unerringly position every player on the stage. By virtue of its bottomless well of dynamic contrasts and tonal colors, the Kimber unearths previously unheard energy and atmospheric lift from even the most familiar recordings. The KS achieves a level of intimacy and low-level clarity that is almost embarrassing in its candor. (250)

Analysis Plus Silver Apex

$4399 8' pr.

Silver Apex has one of the most open, natural voices NG has heard in a cable. Like AP's top-performing Micro Golden interconnect, its midrange is bold, ripe, and textured, with loads of inner detail. Neither romantically warm nor clinically cool Silver Apex simply goes in the direction of the recording without commentary. Treble octaves are expressive and colorful. In the bass, it intensifies the gravitas of low percussion—kettle drums, for example—walking the fine line between power and control. Almost frictionless, Silver Apex adds no sense of drag to the signal, reproducing ensembles and cavernous acoustic spaces with speed, clarity, and fluency. Not inexpensive but still well within the bounds of high-end sanity, this is a flagship-level cable that can stand its ground with the best of the best. (301)

WyWires Diamond

Interconnect $4495/1.2m pr. RCA and XLR; speaker $7995/8' pr.

Diamond is a Litz-wire air-dielectric design incorporating tiny, individually insulated strands of ultra-pure copper. Impeccably assembled it is also a cable of ultra-wide expressiveness and resolution. Its sound is settled, fast but not twitchy or brittle and utterly devoid of histrionics. In tonal character the Diamond edges toward the warmer side of the spectrum but only by a breath. It's not forward-leaning, but it doesn't flinch from hard rock sizzle or flesh-eating dynamics, either. Its approach embodies a softer sell that grows ever more multi-faceted, musical, and transparent. A cable for connoisseurs. (264)

Esprit Audio Eureka Phono Cable

$5399 1.2m

If there is such a thing as a cable that speaks fluent "analog," Esprit has produced it. Exhibiting premium performance at every observable level, Eureka conveyed heady microdynamics, inner detail, fluidity, superb timing, a grasp of the intricacies of texture and timbre, and harmonic density that proved spellbinding. Exquisitely finished from end-to-end and designed to last, it's expensive but unquestionably capable of eliciting the finest from any top-notch LP playback rig. Aficionados running a high-end tonearm/cartridge combination wouldn't want to opt for anything less. (328)

Purist Audio Design Dominus Diamond Revision

Interconnect $5979/1m pr. RCA.; speaker $12,489/1.5m pr.

The all-silver Dominus is very detailed, very dynamic, very rich. Less open than Nordost Valhalla and darker in balance, it is also quieter, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and airborne vibration. (Not reviewed)

Analysis Plus Micro Golden Oval

Interconnect $5999/1m pr.

It's said that silence is golden, a notion reinforced by the sonic stillness that defines the performance of AP's top-tier Micro Golden Oval interconnect. In this instance, it's also literally

true, given the coating of pure gold over these interconnects' 18AWG copper conductors. Representing the most advanced version of the hollow-oval geometry AP has been honing over the years, the Micro Golden Oval's performance is stirring, warm, resonant, and as musically natural as NG has heard, making for a state-of-the-art contender. (272)

Esprit Audio Lumina

Interconnect $6499/1.2m pr.; speaker $5999/2m pr.

From the gleam of its connectors and carbon-fiber accents, everything about Lumina oozes quality and opulence. By ramping up the silver-plated, 6N-OCC-copper-conductor count, Lumina communicates a faithful tonal balance that hews ever so slightly to the richer, warmer-blooded, soothing side of the spectrum. Central to its character is the weight and intensity of its midrange, which, if it were a bar of chocolate, would be of a darker variety—complex and savory. There is density and foundation backing every note, and Lumina really sings on top, displaying a combination of sweetness and speed. Equally striking is its replication of dimension, distance, and soundstage. Top-notch. (306)

Transparent Audio XL

Interconnect $6800/1m pr. RCA, $12,000/1m pr. XLR; speaker $19,000/8' pr.

AHC's general view of interconnects and speaker cables has long been that, while investing in high-quality wire is well worth it, the differences in sound and performance are often exaggerated. The new Generation 5 version of the Transparent Audio XL Cables has changed his mind. The interconnects and speaker cables can be set to match the loads and interactions of specific components, and the end results are clearer and more revealing than both the previous-generation Transparent and virtually all the competition AHC has had the opportunity to audition. Even if you are a cable atheist or agnostic, you should really audition the XL. No sonic miracles, but the kind of subtle real-word improvements in detail and lifelike musical dynamics than really matter. (264)

Synergistic Research Galileo Discovery

Interconnect $7995/1m pr. RCA; $9495/1m pr. XLR; speaker $17,995/8' pr.; AC $6995/5'

Although it is a bit of a pain to use—because of the various grounding connections required—Galileo Discovery is less of a pain than previous SR wires, simply because the dielectric biasing circuit is built into each cable (saving you the bother of having to deal with all those little biasing boxes and wall-wart power supplies). More importantly, the UEF marks a dramatic shift in sonics, coming far closer to neutral in balance than the darker-sounding originals, without sacrificing any of the speed, richness, resolution, and power-range solidity that SR is famous for. (Forthcoming)

AudioQuest Dragon

$9500 1m RCA; $11,900 1m XLR

This interconnect did things RH had never heard from a cable—or more precisely, Dragon allowed the system to reveal previously hidden qualities. The midrange was simply luscious, liquid, and stunningly present and vivid. Vocals were completely untethered to the speakers and projected against an absolutely silent background. This had the effect of increasing the sense of presence and fostering the startling impression of the vocalist being in the room. Another aspect of Dragon that is unique is that it conveys more richly saturated tone color. The sound, from the lowest bass to the top treble, simply has greater body and weight. RH's reference. (331)

Nordost Valhalla 2 Reference

Interconnect $9999/1m pr.; speaker $12,759/1.25m pr., $15,729/2m pr.; power $6599/1m

Valhalla, the home of the Norse Gods, is exalted territory. The new Valhalla cable from Nordost safely occupies it. A mesmerizing cable, it provides thunderbolt dynamics and whiplash speed, probing deeply into the soundstage to excavate the nuances of the music. The old negatives that some previously associated with Nordost—a bleached treble and astringent transients—are simply not in evidence. Instead, the Valhalla represents a big leap in performance for the company. While it is not quite at the level of the company's new flagship Odin II cable, it features an upgraded dual-monofilament technology that employs ten silver-plated, 24AWG, oxygen-free-copper conductors. Valhalla 2 also features a specially designed Holo:Plug, a new connector that is designed to preserve signal integrity. The tariff is high, but then again so is the performance of the Valhalla. (254)

Synergistic Research SRX

Interconnect $12,995/1m pr. RCA and XLR; speaker $29,995/8' pr.

Ted Denney & Co.'s latest creations, the tunable, actively shielded, multi-stranded, pure silver and silver/copper alloy SRX cables and interconnects, are the most sophisticated products Synergistic Research has developed since SR's original Galileo. They are also the best-sounding—by quite a fair margin. Sonically, what they remind JV of are Crystal Cable's Art Series Da Vincis—only they're half the money. No, they are not quite as low in noise or as high in dimensionality and resolution as the Da Vincis, which literally set the gold standard in these regards, but JV would bet that even a persnickety listener won't hear a $10,000–$20,000 difference between the two. Denney has long claimed that he offers wires that equal or beat the very best money can buy for half the dough. In this case, his boast is easily verifiable—all you have to do is audition them. One of JV's references, and Denney's best effort yet. (333)

Siltech Royal Double Crown

$18,100/1m interconnect; $37,500/2m loudspeaker cable; $15,300/2m power cord

These silver cables, which are based on a 6-core Hexagon construction, deliver a purity of sound that truly is fit for a king. The Royal Double Crown does not deliver razzle-dazzle but a lustrous presentation that is cut from the same sonic cloth throughout the frequency spectrum. The Double Crown's lack of grain is remarkable. Without sacrificing detail or transient bite, it captures the natural warmth of a string quartet or orchestra, all set against a jet-black

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background. The low noise level of the cable means that instruments emerge naturally with an almost soothing quality to them. Bass reproduction is full and taut, helping to endow the music with rhythmic solidity and weight. Is there more to be had? The Double Crown is second from the top of the Siltech line, but the performance it provides should satisfy the most exacting audio connoisseur. (337)

Echole Limited Edition

$19,500 (3' balanced interconnect pair); $23,500 (6' speaker cable); $16,000 6' power cord

These ultra-exotic interconnects and speaker cables from Echole, sister company to Absolare, feature not just custom design and geometry, but custom metallurgy that includes silver, gold, and palladium. With a solid-core conductor so thick it's almost a rod, these cables are heavier and less pliable than most. Although priced at the upper end of the spectrum, the Echoles deliver first-rate sound quality. Rather than present a specific set of sonic characteristics, they seem to lower the level of noise and coloration, allowing the rest of the components in the system to better reveal the music's beauty. These are among the cleanest and most transparent cables RH has heard. (280)

Crystal Cable Art Series Da Vinci

Interconnect cable $23,900/1m pr. ($7300 +0.5m); speaker $46,500/2m pr. (+0.5m $7900)

Crystal Cable and Siltech chief engineer Edwin Rijnveld's latest top-of-the-line creations, the Art Series Da Vinci wires, are the quietest components of their type JV has ever heard. There are sound technical reasons for this: Edwin's Art Series Da Vinci wires have a newly constructed dual-layer shield—one layer a mesh of pure G9 silver/gold-alloy strands, the other of pure MonoX silver—which provides *verifiably* wider immunity against EM and RF fields, lower ground impedance, lower inductance, much lower capacitance (three times lower than JV's previous reference Crystal Cable Ultimate Dreams), and lower current distortion. The improvement isn't only a matter of measurements on paper; it is as immediately audible as the shockingly deep silences of optical-cartridge playback are—and fosters the exact same impression of neutrality, completeness, and higher fidelity. Da Vinci is a genuine step forward in cable, interconnect, and power cord design—not a different or more appetizing "flavor" but a lowering of the characteristic noises (and susceptibility to noises) that *give* wires their flavors. JV's reference. (326)

Nordost Odin 2

Interconnect $29,499/1m pr. ($3250 per additional half-meter pair); $39,599/1m pr. speaker ($5280 per additional half-meter pair)

With the Odin 2, Nordost has taken an already formidable cable and pushed it into the stratosphere where it achieves dizzying levels of performance. Any lingering sense of aggressiveness and excessive friskiness in the treble region that existed with Odin 1 has been utterly effaced by Nordost's latest effort. What emerges with the new construction of this cable, which includes different terminations of the plugs and connectors, is a marvelously dynamic and pellucid sound that most of its competitors would be quite hard-pressed to surpass, let alone equal. Add tautness of the bass and solidity of imaging, and you have a real winner. This is an immensely impressive cable that will take the finest audio systems to another level of sound reproduction. (270)

AudioQuest Dragon ZERO/Dragon BASS

Speaker $34,100/8' pr.; Dragon BASS $26,100/8' pr.; Dragonbiwire combo $60,200/8' pr.

This new top-level speaker cable from AudioQuest is easily the best cable the company has ever made. Dragon ZERO features AudioQuest's finest materials and technologies, including its Solid Perfect-Surface silver conductors, Carbon-Based Noise Dissipation System, and the long-standing Dielectric Bias System. Its sound is extremely open and dynamic, as though a lid were removed from the music. The sense of transparency in the midrange and treble and of unlimited top-end extension is stunning. Although the soundstage is highly illuminated, Dragon ZERO doesn't sound bright or fatiguing. Dragon BASS is designed to drive woofers or subwoofers in bi-wired or bi-amped systems. Although it does a fine job in the bass, most surprising was its ability to render smoother midrange and treble textures, as well as increase low-level resolution across the entire band—a phenomenon attributable to the Dragon BASS' noise-reduction technology. RH's reference speaker cables. (RH)

Echole Infinity

$47,500 10' loudspeaker cable

Echole's top speaker cable features custom metallurgy developed by Echole. The primary conductor is a 2.1mm solid-core run of silver, gold, and palladium custom alloy augmented by runs of eight-nines-purity copper. The structure is fully symmetrical and hand braided, terminated with rhodium-plated Furutech connections. The speaker cable is extremely transparent, faithfully conveying whatever signal is fed to it. It has tremendous clarity and detail without sounding analytical. A very musically involving and rewarding cable. (Forthcoming)

POWER CORDS

Shunyata Research Venom 14

$145

Shunyata's entry-level is a quantum leap over the standard, no-name cord. Flexible and UL-approved, Venom 14 adds transient pop and image stability, opens the soundstage, and peels away the veiling that inhibits transparency and resolution. A bit forward in character, the Venom 14 provides an excitement that really lights up the soundstage. Although low-level dynamics and deep bass could use further refinement, Venom 14 is an audiophile-level product that makes it fun to spend less. (208)

Audience forte F3 powerChord

$250/1.75m

Sheer excellence in the entry-level power-cord bracket, the Audience forte F2 powerChord is a definite winner. It will lift the performance of any system as it lowers the noise floor, improves transient attack, and permits a wider expression of dynamic contrasts and low-level details. The hot tip is opting for the Audience's forte V8 power strip, then this cord will be included. (311)

Wireworld Electra 7

$400/2m

Wireworld's line of power cords breaks with the conventional wisdom that says power cords need to be thick and unwieldy in order to impress. Not true. The mid-priced Electra 7s are defiantly flat, lightweight, and competitive with elite power cords costing many times their price. They possess a full-bodied, high-density sound with a rich midrange and naturalistic top end. Their pliability makes them a major advancement for today's well-groomed media rooms. (Not reviewed)

Furutech DPS-4.1

$480 per meter

Everything that goes into DPS-4.1 can be purchased direct-online, or through its dealer network, and is available to home users interested in finishing their own custom lengths and terminations (and are handy enough with a crimping tool and a soldering iron to complete the task). Imbued with an arresting sense of acoustic openness, DPS-4.1 firmed up bass response and plumped up body in the midrange, adding gravitas to the resonances of stand-up acoustic bass. As veiling is reduced, it also enhanced micro-information. The home-assembly approach of the DPS-4.1 is not for everyone, but for those of us who are more hands-on, Furutech performs on a par with some of the top contenders currently available, at a considerable cost savings. (317)

Shunyata Research Venom NR10 and V14 Digital

$550, $350

Advancements in its popular Venom line led to the creation of the NR Series (NR signifying noise reduction). Still modestly priced, NR power cords contain many of Shunyata's technologies and custom-manufactured parts, including electrostatic shields to reduce radiated noise. They are also Shunyata's lowest-price power cables with built-in CCI filters, which measurably reduce power-line noise generated by components. In the areas of instrumental timbre, sensitivity to micro-dynamics, and overall tonal refinement, NR power cords provide a clear improvement over Venom HC cords. The results are especially transformational when the Venoms are paired with Shunyata's own power conditioner, the Hydra Delta D6, as a complete system. (305)

Kimber Kable PK-10 Ascent

$564/2m

The PK-10 Ascent picks up where the mean green original Palladian leaves off but in a more malleable, far less costly package. The Kimber is an exemplar of the heavy-hitting power cord—high output, energy, and dynamics. It has a richer, thicker midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth not unlike the topflight Palladian although not as wide open on vocals. But for bass extension and sustain, it is deserving of some of the highest marks. Nicely detailed and uncompressed with only vague remnants of treble peakiness, the PK-10 exemplifies an open, colorful, high-density sound that places it near the top of any survey. (208)

VooDoo Infinity Digital, Infinity Power, and Air Spectra

$850/6ft, $2050/6ft, and $2300/6ft

Compared with stock power cords, going full VooDoo is a little like squeegeeing the windows and grabbing a dustbuster. The common perception of images sounding pinched or constricted is largely reduced. The interplay between musicians, orchestral sections, and the ambient space between sections grows just a little more open and layered, even more so with Air Spectra. The VooDoo cords imparted a slight forwardness that tended to close the distance between the stage and the listener. They suggested a cooler overall tonal character, not laid-back or overly dry but leaning toward a more clinical interpretation of the music. Transients were quick and dynamics very good. Bass response overall was well extended, controlled, and timbrally exacting. In a hobby where even the smallest component can add something magical, this is precisely what adding a little VooDoo can do. Infinity is available in power and digital versions (284)

Audience Studio One powerChord

Studio One MP powerChord, $1881 for 5'; Studio One LP, $1662 for 5'; Studio One Full Power, $2634 for 5'

The new Studio One version of Audience's already superb Au24 AC cords render an across-the-board sonic improvement. Based on the original design of multi-strand conductors and high-purity mono-crystal copper, the Studio One brings to the table new connectors with higher-quality metallurgy and lower-mass terminations. Moreover, Audience now offers the Studio One in three versions, low-power for DACs, preamps, and phonostages, medium-power for lower-powered integrated amplifiers, and high-power for power amplifiers. The lower-powered versions not only sound better on low-current consumption sources, but they are also less expensive. In any configuration the Studio One delivers a low noise floor, neutrality, and an almost preternatural sense of recorded space and ambience. (219, 245)

Nordost Tyr 2

$3349/1m

Like Nordost's Tyr interconnect, the Tyr power cord adds transparency, precision, purity, depth, texture, openness, and expansiveness to your listening. (305)

Shunyata Research Sigma NR V2

$3500

Shunyata continues to push forward the state of the art in AC power for audio, with the Sigma NR V2 being a prime example. These AC cords incorporate noise filters

right inside the connectors, acting as miniature power conditioners to isolate components from noise. The build-quality is outstanding, with all custom parts including the carbon-fiber housing. The Sigma NR bests Shunyata's previous models by deepening the background, increasing resolution at the lowest levels, rendering textures more realistically, and allowing the rest of your components to sound their best. (311)

Clarus Concerto

$4000

The Clarus Concerto is an unassuming, but well-made, rack-mountable module with a power switch and dimmer button on the front, and a clever and unique cable-support bar on the back that prevents the dreaded heavy power cable droop we all know and hate. The Concerto offers a total of eight outlets, separately specialized for high current, digital, and analog sources. Clarus' five-tier approach to conditioning lowers the noise floor without restricting dynamics (to a point). Reviewer Matt Clott's digital and analog sources benefited from what the Concerto provided: blacker backgrounds, more dynamics, and a cleaner canvas upon which to paint the music. Image specificity was also heightened, and the stage seemed to take a step closer to the back wall. (306)

AudioQuest Dragon Constant-Current AC Power Cable

$4500/1m; high-current model: $5500/1m

AudioQuest has certainly broken new ground with the Dragon cord. It features fire and fury in the form of superb dynamics, but also a low noise floor that allows you to hear much further into the soundstage. Small details and nuances that were previously obscured or smudged emerge with pellucid clarity. But it is the smoothness, the lack of grain that the Dragon imparts to the overall sound that is its most beguiling quality. In a crowded field of competitors, the Dragon may well be at the top of the heap, at least for now. (291)

VooDoo Air Phoenix/Air Dragon/Air Tesla

$4900/$3750/$3200

These top-end power cords are made from a mix of exotic materials and construction techniques, including pure-silver, single-crystal, continuous-cast, Ohno eight-gauge conductors and rhodium-plated-over-tellurium copper connectors, individually insulated with velocity-matched Teflon dielectrics and heavily braided silver-plated-copper shielding, covered with woven static-resistant Nomex mesh, all cryogenically treated. Sonically, they produced an instantly apparent increase in resolution, timbre (particularly in the bottom octaves), separation of instruments, speed, and lowered noise, resulting in a profound improvement in almost every aspect of MC's system. (334)

Audience Au24 SX powerChord

$5060/6' (MP version, $4621/6')

Au24 SX represents Audience's latest wire geometry and isolation technology. It is double cryogenically treated in-house. Compared with forerunner SE, SX presents an even-lower noise floor—a virtual black sea of calm. With such a reduction in grunge and glaze the acoustics and ambience of a venue are revealed—like the dark silences that precede the lifting of the conductor's baton. The upshot is a soundstage of rock-solid stability and continuity that is ripe with low-level micro-detailing and transient attacks. The final and perhaps key distinction observed with the SX is the more fully realized sense of dimension and focused depth that accompanies a great orchestral performance. A state-of-the-art c[h]ord. (291)

Synergistic Research Galileo Discovery

$6995/5'

Like its new SX cables and interconnects, Synergistic's Galileo Discovery power cords make components sound exceptionally neutral, powerful, fast, spacious, and detailed. (244)

Shunyata Research Omega XC, Omega QR-s, Omega QR

$7000/$7500/$9000

The Omega series of power cords are easily Shunyata's finest effort to date. They are packed with Shunyata's most advanced technologies and construction techniques, resulting in power cords that have a profound effect on a system. The Omega cables reduce noise to such low levels that previously unheard musical details emerge. Music's micro-structure is revealed with greater clarity and vividness, infusing instrumental textures with greater life and realism. This increased detail resolution extends to spatial cues; the Omega greatly expands the soundstage depth and dimensionality. Instruments toward the back of the hall are rendered with tremendous air, depth, and clarity. Three iterations of Omega are designed for specific applications. RH's reference. The Omega QR/QR-s(not reviewed) adds noise-reduction technology right in the cable. RH, 312

Synergistic Research SRX

$10,000/6'

Just like the SRX cables and interconnects, these SRX power cords are the best products Synergistic has yet developed. Once again, they come a whole lot closer than shouting distance to Crystal Cable's fabulous Da Vincis (see below)—only they cost half as much. An ultra-high-end bargain if ever there was one, assuming, of course, that 10g's for a power cord qualifies as a bargain in your bank book (and in your wife's pre-nup). (333)

Crystal Cable Art Series Da Vinci

$18,900/1.5m (+0.5m $4300)

As was the case with the cables and interconnects, Edwin Rijnveld's Da Vinci power cords banish noise, creating a depth of silence that allows music, music-makers, and venues to be more completely and neutrally reproduced. Just the best power cord (a whole lot of) money can buy. (326)

Echole Infinity

$24,500

Echole's top-of-the-line Infinity power cord features custom metallurgy developed by Echole. As with its speaker cable, the primary conductor is a 2.1mm solid-core run of

silver, gold, and palladium augmented by runs of eight-nines-purity copper. The structure is fully symmetrical and hand braded, terminated with rhodium-plated Furutech connections. Sonically, it is outstanding. (Forthcoming)

DIGITAL CABLES

Straight Wire USB-Link

$60/1m, $72/1.5m

This well-made, great-sounding USB cable is a relative bargain, delivering outstanding dynamics, timbral fidelity, and transparency. (Not reviewed)

AudioQuest Forest USB

$69.95/0.75m; $89.95/1.5m

For those on a tight budget, Forest is a large upgrade over a generic USB cable that was never designed for audio. Compared to standard USB cables, Forest offers a larger and more dimensional soundstage, more liquid and lifelike timbres, and greater transparency. (Not reviewed)

AudioQuest Carbon USB

$179.95/0.75m; $229.95/1.5m

One of the go-to USB cables for computer-audio fans and highly recommended by USB pioneer and guru Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio, the Carbon is neutral without sounding bleached, dynamic without sounding piercing, detailed without sounding analytical. (Not reviewed)

Wireworld Platinum Starlight Series 8

$275/1m, $350/2m Ethernet; $1800/1m 110-ohm AES/EBU; $800/2m USB 2.0; $1000/1m HDMI

Don't believe that the wires that transmit data from one digital component to another can make a difference sonically? Wireworld Cable Technology's founder, David Salz, can demonstrate otherwise with 25 years worth of experiments utilizing his patented Cable Comparator methodology. Like the manufacturer's analog products, Wireworld's top Ethernet, coaxial AES/EBU, USB, and HDMI cables employ a unique DNA HELIX® geometry, with layers of flat solid-silver conducting elements oriented in parallel strands, as well as COMPOSILEX® 3 insulation to minimize signal loss and triboelectric noise. End plugs are robust. The result is a portfolio of digital data connections that are exceptionally quiet and neutral, suitable for use with the finest DACs, processors, and servers. (339)

Straight Wire Info-Link AES/EBU or Coaxial Digital Cable

$480/1m, $650/1.5m

This reasonably priced digital cable offers a host of virtues, including high transparency to the source, spacious soundstaging, a treble that is open and detailed without sounding analytical, and wide dynamics. A bargain. (Not reviewed)

Nordost Heimdall 2 USB

$599/1m

Nordost's mid-line Heimdall 2 USB cable is capable of great detail, body, texture, and spatial resolution. The Heimdall 2 is also characterized by very low levels of grain, with smooth instrumental and vocal textures. (261)

Clarus Cable Crimson USB

$660/1m

Clarus Cable has quickly gained a well-deserved reputation for standout performance at reasonable prices (reasonable for the high end, anyway). The Crimson USB nails the midrange with a fullness of body, warmth, transient alacrity, and overall honesty that calms the mind and relaxes the ear. JHb was struck by how persuasively warm and articulate this cable was. Its overall balance and light touch with difficult-to-capture vocal sibilants were excellent. The Clarus is an authentic bargain with performance that flirts with top-tier cables. A terrific upgrade cable (a standard-setter in this range) for new and experienced computer-audio fans alike. (254)

AudioQuest Diamond USB

$699/0.75m; $849/1.5m

This pricey USB cable is simply revelatory in its combination of ease and refinement on one hand, and resolution and transparency on the other. Although capable of resolving the finest detail, Diamond USB has a relaxed quality that fosters deep musical involvement. Expensive, but worth it in high-end systems. (221)

Audience frontRow USB

frontRow USB $1300/1m (plus $75 per 0.25m)

Don't listen to the frontRow USB in your system unless you're prepared to shell out the long green. The frontRow is expensive, but worth it. The first thing you'll notice is that the frontRow has two jacketed sets of conductors rather than one. One set carries the signal, and the other, power. Frankly, there's nothing to fault in the frontRow USB. Many USB cables—as with everything else in audio—force you to make tradeoffs: This cable has better resolution, while another may have greater smoothness and ease. The Audience cable seemingly does it all; it is convincingly superior in every sonic criterion. The frontRow USB is priced at the very top end of the scale, but if you want a no-compromise USB cable, look no further. (Au24 SE+ reviewed in 254)

Shunyata Sigma USB

$2000

Shunyata has made some great products over the years, but the new Sigma USB may be the company's single best achievement yet. Replace any USB cable with the Sigma USB and you'll hear a significant improvement in soundstage openness, dynamic contrasts, and textural liquidity. RH's reference.

AudioQuest Wild AES/EBU

$2900/0.75m; $3800/1.5m

Wild is packed with AudioQuest's top-shelf technologies, including its Perfect Surface Silver conductors, 72V Dielectric Bias System (DBS), Noise Dissipation System, and cold welding of the conductors to terminations machined from high-purity copper. The sonic result is the best AES/EBU cable RH has heard, with ultra-fine resolution of detail and a finely filigreed top end that allows highest-quality DACs, such as the dCS Vivaldi and Berkeley Alpha Reference, to sound their best. Expensive, but worth it. (Not reviewed)

Shunyata Research Omega USB

$3250

This USB cable is so much better than any other USB cable RH has heard. It is so good it may even be the most outstanding product Shunyata has produced—and that's saying something. Omega simply doesn't have the "chalky" midrange and treble that plagues the USB interface, replacing that graininess with smooth liquidity. Dynamics are stunning, and the bass extends to the netherworld.

Synergistic Research Galileo Discovery USB

$3395/1m

Though scarcely a digital maven, JV has tried any number of highly touted USB cables on the sly. The only one he truly likes is Galileo Discovery—and then only when it is run from a computer source to Berkeley Audio's USB-to-AES converter. Synergistic's top-line USB cable offers the same virtues as its other Galileo Discovery products—power, speed, resolution, spaciousness, and tonal beauty. With digital, that gorgeous tonality really pays off. (Not reviewed)

Transparent Audio XL Digital

$3670/1m, XL 75-ohm ($1300/add'l 5') $4195/1m, XL 110-ohm AES/EBU ($1700/add'l 5')

When used on the dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD system, these cables immediately improved the depth, width, and transparency of the soundstage. Transient speed was also markedly crisper than with stock cables or, for that matter, just about any other digital cable that JHb has used. The treble is noticeably smoother, and the bass firmer and more refulgent with Transparent. Most impressive is their ability to add another layer of dimensionality to the sound, rendering it more tactile and bringing the listener one step closer to the emotional heart of the music. Nothing else seems to capture timbral fidelity as successfully as Transparent. For anyone with a top-flight digital rig, auditioning these digital cables is not an option. It is a must. (239)

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(And Where to Find Them in This Issue)

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ENTRY LEVEL

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p.132 Schiit Audio Mani phonostage, $149
p.112 Schiit Audio Magnius preamplifier, $199
p.158 AudioQuest DragonFly Red and Cobalt DACs, $229/$349
p.160 Schiit Audio Modius DAC, $229
p.217 Kimber Kable Hero interconnect, $296; 8TC speaker cable, $650
p.198 Grado Opus3 phono cartridge, $300
p.14 PSB Alpha P5 loudspeakers, $399
p.174 Pro-Ject T1 turntable, $449
p.94 NAD C 328 integrated amplifier, $599
p.14 Polk R200 loudspeaker, $699
p.114 Schiit Audio Freya+ preamplifier, $849

A STEP UP

p.198 Denon DL-103 phono cartridge, $349
p.217 Nordost Purple Flare interconnect, $389; speaker cable, $582
p.134 iFi iPhono 3 Black Label phonostage, $599
p.68 Odyssey Khartago stereo power amplifier, $995
p.28 Magnepan LRS+ loudspeaker, $995
p.14 Sonus faber Lumina I loudspeaker, $999
p.94 NAD C 3050 Integrated $1399
p.70 LSA Warp 1 power amplifier, $1499
p.16 Audiovector QR1 loudspeaker, $1725

MID-PRICED

p.218 Wireworld Eclipse 8 interconnect, $525; Mini Eclipse 8 speaker cable, $700
p.198 Hana SL phono cartridge, $750
p.62 GoldenEar ForceField 30 subwoofer, $900
p.62 JL Audio Dominion d08 and d10 subwoofers, $1100/$1300
p.175 Technics SL-1500C-K direct-drive turntable, $1299
p.134 Hegel V10 phonostage, $1650
p.175 Rega Planar P6 turntable, $1875
p.114 NuPrime AMG PRA preamplifier, $1895
p.96 NAD C 399 integrated amplifier, $2199
p.162 Schiit Audio Yggdrasil DAC, $2299
p.30 Magnepan MG 1.7i loudspeaker, $2995
p.31 Vandersteen Model 2Ce Signature III loudspeaker, $3900
p.72 Rogue Audio DragoN power amplifier, $3995
p.16 MoFi SourcePoint 10 loudspeaker, $3999

UPPER END

p.222 Audience Au24 SX interconnect, $1999; Au24 SX speaker cable, $3616
p.200 DS Audio 003 optical phono cartridge, $2500
p.200 Hana Umami Blue phono cartridge, $2500
p.114 Rogue Audio RP-5/RP-7 preamplifiers, $3495/$4995
p.176 EAT C-Dur turntable,$3799 ($4599 with cartridge as reviewed)
p.154 Bryston BDA-3.14 streaming DAC, $4495
p.64 JL Audio Fathom f112v2/f113v2 subwoofers, $5000/$6000
p.136 Boulder 508 phonostage, $5400
p.32 Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2 loudspeaker, $7000
p.20 Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4 loudspeaker, $8500
p.33 Magnepan MG 3.7i loudspeaker, $8795
p.102 Aesthetix Mimas integrated amplifier, $9000
p.34 Vandersteen Treo CT loudspeaker, $10,690

ULTRA HIGH END

p.136 MoFi Electronics MasterPhono phonostage, $6000
p.76 PS Audio Stellar M1200 monoblock power amplifier, $6998/pr.
p.156 Lumin P1 network player/preamplifier, $10,000
p.164 Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 3, $10,995
p.204 Air Tight PC-1 Supreme phono cartridge, $11,600
p.182 Basis Bravo turntable, $13,700
p.22 MBL 126 loudspeaker, $14,800
p.80 Constellation Inspiration preamplifier/Inspiration stereo amplifier, $14,500/$16,000
p.37 Wilson Audio SabrinaX loudspeaker, $19,700
p.37 Magnepan MG20.7/MG30.7 loudspeaker, $19,795, $39,995
p.164 dCS Bartok Apex DAC, $20,950
p.44 Magico S3 loudspeaker, $45,500

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